

# AT THE EDGE

Exploring new  
interpretations of  
past and place in  
archaeology, folklore  
and mythology

**No.4 December 1996**

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Cover: Sixteenth century gilded roof boss, Priory church of St Mary & St Cuthbert, Bolton Abbey, Yorkshire. A community of Augustinian canons settled here in this beautiful situation above the River Wharfe in 1154, but was continually beset by turbulent fortunes. Even a bribe could not spare the priory from dissolution and the monks were finally driven out in 1539. Only the nave remains intact, still in use as the parish church. The roof is a Tudor replacement, installed about this time. What a splendid boss where a leaf twisting from a single eye to frame the face and another from one side of the mouth is most unusual. **Photograph by Ruth Wylie.**

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# How old *is* that old yew?

'Dark yew that graspest at the stone And dippest towards the dreamless head . . .' wrote Tennyson in a funereal mood. The human race is born and dies, but yew trees live forever. You do not have to be a Tennyson to respond to their deep, disturbing, uncalculated age. William Watson certainly was not poet laureate material, but the silent presences of Merrow Down's yew wood inspired him all the same:-

Old emperor Yew, fantastic sire,  
Girt with thy guard of dotard kings  
What ages hast thou seen retire  
Into the dusk of alien things?

A profound question. Let us spoil the poetry by answering it.

There was once a man who was called up to join the army. They asked him all the usual questions, down to the last one on the form: what was his religion? 'Methuselahite', he replied. Come again? 'It means', said the reluctant soldier, 'that I'm going to stay alive as long as I bloody well can'. Now the yew tree is the original Methuselahite, and everything about it is framed to live forever.

Yew grows slowly. Even when young it will only increase its

girth half as fast as other forest trees, because it is laying down hard, closegrained wood. That imparts immense strength to the trunk and branches and - from the viewpoint of mortal men - provides durable wood for carving and turning as well as making those famous bows.

With age the yew becomes less straight, 'an unsmooth tree . . . roots twisted in the earth' as the *Rune Poem* says, but it does not lose its strength. Trees know nothing of old age or death: they grow on and on until accident finishes them off.

*JEREMY HARTE* needs no introduction to regular readers of *At the Edge*. New readers might like to know he is the Curator of Bourne Hall Museum, Ewell and a contributor to all previous issues.

It is growth itself which makes them vulnerable. Each year a fresh ring is added to the trunk and branches, drawing on the energy provided by the canopy of leaves. Each successive ring is therefore larger than the last, while the crown of leaves stays the same, having reached a point beyond which the framework of the tree can support no more. At last most trees will snap under their own

*Top:* The yew tree at Crowhurst, Sussex in 1936.  
By Lonsdale Ragg.





Crowhurst in the early nineteenth century.

weight, or keel over in storms: but the yew knows a trick or two. It can turn disease into health by allowing fungal infections to eat up its heartwood, leaving a hollow tree which, such is the tensile strength of all that twisted wood, continues to support the heavy crown of leaves. Meanwhile branches loop down under their own weight until they touch the ground, and there they set root. A young branch may even touch down into the leafmould inside the hollow trunk, and then the tree renews itself from within; or the spread of disease may split the trunk into staves, each bowing out to root itself individually, so that a single tree is transformed into a grove.

The last trick of the yew defeats time itself. The tree simply stops growing. There is no increase in girth, no annual ring. Having reached a sufficient size, it remains stable; it may resume growth, or not; and barring accidents, it can stay the same size until Doomsday. So it is no simple matter to discover the age of a yew tree, and until recently most authorities had given it up as a bad job. The revival of interest in the yew, not just as a tree but as a sacred tree, is due to the work of one man, the

remarkable Allen Meredith.

Meredith is first and foremost a visionary. In the 1970s he received a number of dreams about the meaning of the yew, about its immortality and its powers of wisdom and healing. Unlike most visionaries, he responded to this by getting on his bike and beginning a series of encounters with hundreds of yew trees, measuring and recording them. A self-taught man, Meredith followed up every reference he could find on old yews and single-handedly bridged the gap between mystic intuition and professional biology. He has convinced leading figures, including David Bellamy and Alan Mitchell of the Tree Register, that yews are vastly older - thousands of years older, in some cases - than anyone had realised. He has not convinced me; at least, not in the published version of his work. I shall be showing why. But it is only fair to add that to refute Meredith, a researcher must rely on the immense corpus of information which he has assembled.

He has, for instance, uncovered 37 references to yews planted at various times since the Reformation, and still existing [1]. The statistics of these trees can be plotted out to

give an idea of growth rates - once we know that a tree planted in (say) 1780 is now (say) seven feet in girth, then we can deduce, as a general principle, that the yew grows one foot in 30 years. It is not quite as simple as that, because individual trees differ in their powers of growth - in fact there is a variation of plus or minus five feet from the mean among trees older than 200 years - but the general pattern is clear. The observations of Victorian naturalists, who were measuring younger specimens, suggest a brisker rate of growth - one foot every 20-25 years [2].

But things are different when we come to the really old yews, the veterans of above 20 feet in girth. Nobody knows when they were planted: it is open to doubt whether some were ever planted by human hand at all. But antiquaries have measured the most famous specimens repeatedly since the seventeenth century, and here again we can draw on Meredith's researches, since he has collated figures for 11 of the best-known veterans [3].

The claim that 'old yews grow more slowly than young ones' is not true, if it is taken to mean a gradual deceleration in the growth rate proportionate to the size of the tree. The largest veteran of which there is a full record, the churchyard yew of Darley Dale (32-3 feet) is not growing any slower than the smallest, Church Preen (22-3 feet). Admittedly the sample is small: and comparisons are rendered absurd by another factor. Many of these trees are not growing at all. Totteridge is the best instance. 26 feet in girth in 1677, this tree has been measured on four subsequent occasions, up to the present, without variation. When the Last Trump blows and the dead scramble out of Totteridge churchyard, that tree may still be there, and if it is, it will still be 26 feet round the trunk.

All the other veterans have been through similar periods of inaction. It seems that stability lasts for the tree until its



ecological stasis is broken by a variation in the available sunshine or soil, or through the loss of a branch; then growth recommences at a quite lively rate - one foot in 40 years - until its work is done, after which there is renewed stability.

That is interesting for botanists, but frustrating for the student of antiquities. It makes it impossible to tell how old a yew tree really is, since there is no telling how often it may have ceased to grow in its life, or for how long. Remember our formula of one foot in 30 years, with an allowance of five feet either way for individual variation. On these grounds, a tree 30 feet in girth must date to at least 750 years old, which is AD 1250. But that is a minimum estimate. There is no maximum. All one can say is that trees, like other landscape features, should be regarded as recent until proof is forthcoming that they are old. There are a lot of forces ranged against the life of a tree, man not least amongst them, and to survive the centuries it helps to have had some protective significance in human culture.

In the warm, dry lands that fringe the Mediterranean South there flourish many evergreen trees - cypress, holm oak and laurel as well as yew. The ancients planted these in cemeteries, moved by the contrast between the undying tree and the sad graves around it, and also concerned to set up a durable signifier that this land had been devoted to burials and was not to be broken up for the plough. Cypress and yew therefore became the trees of mourning; their branches were hung up after a death; the Furies carried torches of yew, and consecrated the dead with them [4]. In our own northerly clime, the yew is the only evergreen (barring holly) to grow below the conifer belt, and so it carries a greater symbolic weight. Its toxic foliage, both lethal and undying, stands for death and immortality at once.

In the far-ranging world of early monasticism, many



Tandridge, Kent in 1936. By Lonsdale Ragg.

traditions of the Mediterranean were transferred to Christian communities on the western fringe of Europe; that of the cemetery fringed with evergreens among them. When cypress proved unequal to the Atlantic gales, the monks of Ireland had to resort to yew as a signifier for places of burial. 'Yew, little yew, you are conspicuous in graveyards' says the mad king Suibhne [5]. The

yew beside a chapel or church served to remind its celebrant of death, a grateful reflection for holy men; Columcille spoke to angels beneath the shade of such a tree -

'This is the Yew of the Saints . . . Would that I were set in its place there!

On my left it was pleasant adornment

When I entered into the Black Church'.



A visionary episode in *The Exile of Conall Corc* describes a similar scene at the Rock of Cashel in Tipperary: 'I beheld a yew bush on a stone and I perceived a small oratory in front of it and a flagstone before it. Angels were in attendance going up and down from the flagstone' [6]. The vision is nakedly political, and serves to underwrite the ambitions of a yew-dynasty, the Eoganacht of Munster, but it shows that churches with yews were already familiar in the eighth century. The planting of yews was often ascribed to the early saints. The monastery at Iubhar-Chinntrechta, now Newry, was named after 'the yew tree which Patrick himself had planted', and its burning in 1162 was a national outrage. The yew tree of Clonmacnoise was already venerable in 1149, when it was large enough to shelter a flock of sheep in a storm; lightning struck the tree and 113 sheep were killed [7]. Nineteenth-century traditions should be received with caution, but the yew in the cemetery at Glendalough was said to have been planted by St Kevin, while three elm trees at Kilmonin in Co. Offaly had replaced an earlier trio of yews attributed to St Cuimin [8].

Traditions of this kind were evidently current when Gerald of Wales visited Ireland in the 1180s. He tells of the Norman archers billeted at Finglas, Co. Dublin, who cast greedy eyes on the 'ash trees and yews and various other kinds of trees' which abbot Kenach and his successors 'had formerly planted . . . round the cemetery for the ornament of the church'. The godless invaders cut these up for firewood, but promptly died of plague. Giraldus was struck by the extensive distribution of yew in Ireland. 'You will see them principally in old cemeteries and sacred places, where they were planted in ancient times by the hands of holy men, to give them what ornament and beauty they could' [9]. That some of the

trees had grown to be dominating presences is shown by their frequency in placenames - Cell Iubhar, 'yew church', is found at six places, and Cill-eo and Killeochaille occur with the same meaning [10].

Irish saints, as pilgrims on this earth, were prepared to find a grave away from their own country: but they wanted to keep up the old funeral customs. Iona, settled by Coluncille in 563, is more properly I or Hi, 'yew island' [11]. The trees after which it was named must have been deliberately planted - the coast of Argyll is too windswept for them to have grown naturally - and they would have served as a mark of consecration by the saint or his followers. Graveyard yews in Scotland are most common around the southwest coastline and the mouth of the Clyde, suggesting a custom imported by the Irish missionaries. With time, the yews have become proprietary rather than communal signs; they stand beside individual graves, or mark the private burial places of families within the churchyard [12].

Irish customs were also current in Wales. The laws of Howell Dda, which date from c.950, open the section on trees with 'A yew of a saint is a pound in value' - twice the worth of an oak, and in marked contrast to the miserable 15 pence quoted for 'a yew of a wood' [13]. Evidently the valuation bore no relevance to the worth of the tree, but was intended to protect sacred ground against outrages of the sort carried out at Iubhar-Chinntrechta.

Yew trees appear to have been planted, as at Finglas, around the boundary of the churchyard. The minsters of Esgor and Heullan were anciently 'of celebrity for sheltering yews'. At Llanelly in Brecon, thirteen yews survive out of an original ring of eighteen; Penpont has a larger circle, with thirty-eight trees surviving; Llanfilangel-nant-Melan is ringed by ancient

yews [14]. These trees were evidently planted at a time before the circular *llan* had been replaced by the rectangular churchyard, although the date of this change is itself open to question, and in some cases may be no earlier than the thirteenth century.

In Wales, as in Scotland, the yew appears to have assumed the role of living gravestone. At the abbey of Strata Florida, a veteran yew is pointed out as the grave of Dafydd ap Gwilym - an implausible claim, since the tree is 22 feet and so even at the minimum estimate must have been growing before the death of the celebrated poet in the 1380s. The tradition has a mediaeval origin, however, in a mock-elegy on Dafydd written while he was still alive by Gruffydd Gryg in which it is indeed proposed to bury him under a yew [15]. Tradition also continued to link the yew with saints. The churchyard yew of Llanerfyl owes its existence to St Erfyl, who absent-mindedly left her staff stuck upright in the ground overnight, and in the morning found it had sprouted into a young tree [16]. Without making any claims for the reliability of this story, it can be taken as proof of an enduring link between churchyard yews and pilgrim saints.

Exactly the same tale is told at Congresbury on the other side of the Bristol Channel. The stump of a yew which remains in the churchyard was a flourishing tree before 1829, and the Somerset villagers knew it as St Congar's Walking Stick. The saint has been associated with this place since 894 but his life, a dramatic rignarole in which he features as the errant son of a Byzantine emperor, leaves a wide field for historical inquiries: at least six Congars have been identified in different outposts of the Celtic west [17].

The undergrowth of fantasy at Congresbury is a typical background for the churchyard yew. More veteran trees have survived in England than anywhere else, a tribute to our ancestors' political stability



rather than their piety: unfortunately there are no early sources to match the words of Columcille or Howell Dda.

Claims that a statute commanded the planting of yews in 1483, or that Queen Elizabeth ordered them to be grown in churchyards for the benefit of bowyers, have a way of vanishing on close inspection. No primary source has been quoted, either, for the injunction of Charles VII of France that yew should be grown in the churchyards of Normandy to furnish weapons for crossbowmen. Other traditions, that the trees were planted to shade the church, or to keep cattle from poisoning themselves on the foliage, are no more than antiquarian fancy dressed up as folklore [18]. The cutting of yew branches to be borne in procession on Palm Sunday, as a substitute for the liturgically correct but botanically unavailable olive, was a widespread mediaeval custom. But it only represents a versatile use of pre-existent churchyard yews; Palm Sunday processions were a late development, and many plants other than yew were acceptable for use in the ceremony [19].

It is equally hard to find evidence for the modern belief that yew trees were venerated as part of pagan religion. Allen Meredith is convinced that they were; but then he is a visionary, a passionate advocate for the trees, not an impartial judge of their claims. His colleagues Anand Chetan and Diana Brueton have devoted a great deal of their book *The Sacred Yew* to just this topic. There is a lot about pagan trees and paganism in general; Herne the Hunter, Robin Hood and Hu Gadarn have their turn, together with much other padding of a familiar kind. But actual references to pagan yews are few.

Chetan and Brueton feel that, since the yew is such a remarkable tree, it must have received respect from the earliest times. There is little to support this. The longevity of



Gilbert White's yew at Selborne, Dorset.  
By Hieronymous Grimm, 1776.

the tree was known - the ogham letter Idhio for 'yew' was elliptically described as 'oldest tree' or 'most beautiful of ancients' [20]. But old or not, the trees were felled without regret. The commentary on Brehon law defines yew as a Chieftain Tree not for its sanctity but on account of 'its timber, used for household vessels, breast-plates etc.' Apple and hazel, by contrast, were ritually protected [21]. Yew is so durable a wood that many objects carved in it, both sacred and secular, have survived in the archaeological record. Its use for ogham wands and runestaves therefore bears witness to the sturdiness of its timber and not the enchantment of its name [22].

The shortcomings of pagan literature on this topic do not trouble Chetan and Brueton. It is possible to improve the picture by suggesting that ancient references to apple, ash and oak trees are, in fact, yew; or by identifying Adam of Bremen's account of the evergreen tree at Gamla Uppsala as if it were a yew, despite his unambiguous 'no one knows what kind of a tree it is'. This miraculous tree, capable of bearing seventy-two hanged bodies on its branches, comes from the same storehouse of marvels as the golden chain

which girded the adjoining temple, and to inquire too closely into its botany would obscure the real intent of the story [23]. Similarly the Eo Mugna, one of the five sacred trees of Ireland, bore apples and acorns as well as hazel nuts for its fruit: although its name means 'yew of Mugna', it is obviously a fairy tree, not an actual specimen of *Taxus baccata*. Another of the five trees, the Eo Rossa or 'yew of Ross', was said to have grown in Co. Carlow until it was felled by a congregation of timber-hungry saints. That sounds historical: but then we find that the tree, like its four peers, had grown from the three-natured berries of a branch born by the mysterious antediluvian Trefuilingid Tre-eochair [24]. Story-telling of this kind certainly recalls the *bile* or sacred trees which were honoured in pagan Ireland - but it is not fair to regard the tales as mere echoes from that past. They form a distinct and sophisticated genre of historic fantasy, composed by and for Christians for whom the yew was already associated with the resting places of the holy dead.

The history of the sacred yew can be sketched in outline. It originated in sixth or seventh century Irish monasticism; it was carried over the sea to



Strathclyde and Gwynedd as part of the establishment of missionary *raths* and *llans*. Protected by law in tenth-century Wales, it was cultivated across the border in the West Country and the marcher lands. So it came to be adopted enthusiastically by builders of churches in southern England, the ecological heartland of the yew, and as a result of the Conquest it was grown on the English-facing coasts of Normandy and Brittany [25]. An interpretation on roughly these lines would match up with the written references, the general trends of insular Christian history, and the ages suggested for existing trees by a series of naturalists from 1831 to 1958. But it runs clean contrary to modern estimates of the longevity of yews.

David Bellamy, following his conversion to Allen Meredith's views, has been issuing certificated claims of age for veteran yews. They hang in churches up and down the land and they make an impressive total; over 130 English churchyard yews are said to be older than the establishment of Christianity in this country. Half a dozen are ascribed a date in the late Bronze Age, while a few are more ancient still. That is a bit much for an archaeologist to swallow. The minimum age for these trees, based on the known growth rates, would date most of them to the high Middle Ages.

Stratigraphy imposes some limits to the ambitious claims of Meredith and Bellamy. A yew which has sprouted on an earthwork cannot be older than the soil on which it grows. A number of the trees found away from churchyards are on hedgebanks or boundaries which seem to be of Anglo-Saxon or later date; there are veterans at Wintershall (29 feet in girth), Acton Burnell Park (25 feet), Aldworth (27 feet), Castle Frome (21 feet) and Chevening (20 feet). Some of these are dated by Meredith to 2000

years (first century AD); their archaeological context suggests that they are only half that age. The so-called Pilgrims' Way through Surrey and Kent runs beside banks created by mediaeval ploughing, and the yews growing on these earthworks are already of venerable proportions [26].

At Knowlton in Dorset there is a line of yews, survivors from an early hedgerow, with an average girth of 25 feet. The trees are growing over one of a series of henge monuments, and this has persuaded Meredith to

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**Almost every old yew can be  
seen to harmonise with the  
plan of the church for which it  
was planted.**

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give them an age of 2500 or 3000 years - postdating the abandonment of the henges, it is true, but still pretty old. However, Knowlton was reoccupied in the seventh century as a focus for pagan Saxon burials, focussed on a dominating barrow towards which the hedgerow is aligned. The trees form part of an Anglo-Saxon network of boundaries and burials across the ancient earthworks, and they in their turn may have influenced the choice of the site for a church in the twelfth century [27].

Further evidence linking the yew with pagan burials comes from Taplow, where the excavators of the rich seventh century barrow unceremoniously dislodged a 21-foot tree from the top of the mound. Here, as at Knowlton, the history of the site continues into the Christian era with a church thirty yards away [28]. Evidently the yew was planted at a time when the barrow was more important than the church, either to act as a grave-tree for the eponymous *Taeppa* or to mark out the mound as a place of assembly. Until the decline of hundredal

jurisdictions in the twelfth century, trees were employed as landmarks for moots. A decayed yew stood on a mound at Wormelow Tump until 1855; it had been the moot for one of the Herefordshire hundreds. The hundredal court of Totteridge met under the yew in the churchyard, and the manorial court and fair of Pensale were held under a yew at Langsett. Knowlton itself was the seat of a hundred [29].

But other yews, equal in size and dignity, are found in sites dating from the later Middle

Ages. Trees in deer parks have been preserved as part of a landscape fashion; parks flourished in the thirteenth century, and the yews within them cannot be much older, which means that Meredith's dates for the trees at

Kentchurch Court (35 feet), Knowle Park (20 feet) and Waldershare Park (30 feet) - all estimated at 1000-2000 years old - are again more than double the true age. At Langley Park in Buckinghamshire a self-regenerating yew is growing in a moated farmstead site; one at Brackley in Northamptonshire grows in or over a deserted mediaeval village [30]. Estimates of their age should be made accordingly.

There is of course one mediaeval structure consistently associated with yews - the parish church. Antiquarian literature on the yew owes much to generations of learned incumbents, each one speculating on his own familiar tree, in the manner of Parson Copleston of Offwell (1832) -

'Thy stem, coeval with the  
plinth, I ween  
That lifts my flinty tower above  
the sod'.

This is the crux of the matter. Archaeologically and botanically there is nothing implausible about a date 'coeval with the plinth' for many English churchyard yews. But to go further - to claim that more than a hundred churches were built



on sites chosen because they adjoined flourishing pagan yew trees - that is something else.

There is little direct archaeological evidence. When the 26-foot yew at Selborne came down in the great storm of 1991, the soil under its roots was excavated and an undisturbed area was found, dating to a time when the tree was nine or ten feet in girth. Comparison with more modern trees of known age suggests that the yew was 200–400 years old at that time. This area was cut by, and therefore earlier than, a confined burial whose grave fill contained five residual sherds, none of them later than 1600 and one definitely thirteenth or fourteenth century [31]. A tree which was three centuries old in c.1500 would be roughly contemporary with the earliest, twelfth century, phase of the church. A similar conclusion can be reached by an estimate of size alone; a growth rate of one foot in 30 years up to the first recorded measurement (23 feet in 1778) would suggest that the tree was planted in the eleventh century. Meredith's estimate of 1400 years (sixth century), with all that it implies for the history of the site, is not necessary.

An archaeological case has also been made for the great age of the yew at Tandridge in Surrey. Very tall, 35 feet in girth, and grotesquely hollowed within, it stands by the west wall of the nave. We are assured that within the Saxon crypt stone vaulting can be seen bridging the roots of the tree. This, if true, would vindicate Meredith's claims with a vengeance: for roots grow *pari passu* with trunks, and if these roots were equal to their present size a thousand years ago, then the tree must have been immense even then. On inquiry, however, I find that Tandridge church has no Saxon phase nor any crypt, and that local opinion was as puzzled by the story of the root as I was [32].

Almost every old yew can be seen to harmonise with the plan of the church for which it was



Salcombe Regis, Dorset.  
From Vaughan Cornish's  
*The Churchyard Yew And Immortality*, 1946.

planted. It will stand overshadowing the entrance path to the church porch, normally on the south side; where convenience has dictated a porch to the north, the yew is there also. Sometimes there are two trees, one beside the main funeral path, the other by a minor entrance. As Vaughan Cornish observes, this implies that the church was laid out first and the yews came afterwards. Common sense would suggest this as the general rule. At Dunsfold the church stands on the edge of a bluff overlooking the river Arun, in a Wealden parish of dispersed and secondary settlement [33]. Below the path as it turns to enter the church stands a twisty, hollow yew 24 feet in girth. Meredith in his usual way dates it to 1500 years (fifth century). In which case, you wonder, why does it happen to stand just below the crest of a hill on which a thirteenth-century church was to be built, and opposite its door?

It is not always unreasonable to suppose that churches have been built on pagan sites, but one would like

to see some evidence offered in support. At Fortingall in Perthshire two sections remain from an immense yew which, when intact, must have measured 56 feet in girth. At even the most conservative estimate this tree must be older than the establishment of Christianity in these islands; and although it has been subject to various ritual indignities, including the lighting of Beltane fires against it and the procession of funerals through its trunk, the tree has obviously been cared for over the centuries. Significantly the nearby placename Duneaves is *tigh-neimhid*, 'the house of the sacred grove', and a nearby village has the reputation of being the true centre of Scotland [34]. Here it is easy to believe that the yew was originally tended as an equivalent to the Irish *bile* or tribal tree, and was afterwards adapted as part of the environment of a missionary *kill* during the Christianisation of Dalriada.

Things were different in southern England. Most of the parish churches with which we are dealing were established



long after the extirpation of paganism, and many of them serve communities which were themselves secondary settlements. A village with a name like Ashtead is likely to have come into being through woodland clearance; in fact the church here is known to have been built as a dependent chapel of Leatherhead in 1120, and estimates of age for its 23 feet yew tree must be adjusted accordingly [35].

Some churches, and their yews, can be dated by inference. Lytchett Matravers is one of several parishes in south-eastern Dorset formed in the tenth century by breaking up the parochia of a local minster - in this case, Sturminster Marshall [36]. Nonetheless its yew, 23 feet in girth, is dated by Meredith at 1600 years (fourth century). As before, his estimate of age appears to be double that suggested by the historical context. The same results obtain when churches have been dated archaeologically. At Sydling St Nicholas excavation showed the first phase of the church to be as late as the thirteenth century, thereby fixing a date for its 14 feet yew [37].

There are great problems in proving that any given church is the earliest building standing on its site. There may have been a timber original; there may even have been a pagan predecessor. But the case is much clearer with monasteries, which were built at known dates on greenfield sites. They, too, have their yew trees. Waverley Abbey, founded in 1128, is neighbour to a yew 21 feet in girth; Fountains Abbey, in 1132, is flanked by veteran yews of 22 feet; next comes Dryburgh in 1136, with a 12 feet tree; Ankerwyke Priory, founded in 1160, adjoins a 31 feet tree; Strata Florida, founded 1184, as we have seen has one of 22 feet; at Muckross Abbey, of 1440, the tree is 12 feet and stands in the centre of the cloister, obviously a deliberate planting [38].

These trees belong to the last phase in the cultural history of the sacred yew, its adoption by the Anglo-Norman aristocracy. The tree at Dryburgh - the northernmost of this group - has grown slowly, while that at Ankerwyke, in the rich floodplain of the Thames, has

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## What are a few centuries here and there when the neo-pagan salvation of the planet is in question?

---

flourished. Generally, however, the dimensions of the yews support the rule of thumb with which we began, of growth at a rate of one foot in 30 years with a five-foot margin of error. It is hardly necessary to add that Meredith's estimates for the dates of these trees make them, yet again, twice as old as the buildings which they were in fact planted to embellish.

I sometimes wonder whether this search for pagan antecedents does not betray a subconscious resentment against the Christian tradition. The annals of geomantic research are full of attempts to marginalise or explain away the achievements of the Church, as if sacredness and Christianity were somehow at variance with one another. In Allen Meredith's case this zeal for pagan origins has persuaded him that Magna Carta was signed, not on the accepted site of Runnymede, but at Ankerwyke under the shelter of an age-old yew, the *axis mundi* of a prechristian cult. The tree itself has sent him dreams of a coronation ceremony, and messages about the threat to its existence (a planned golf course). Well, if your life was in danger, wouldn't you be prepared to glamourise your origins a little? [39].

In 1992 David Bellamy led a meeting which proposed - 777 years after the original event - a new Great Charter, a revised ecological version granting

rights of a somewhat non-specific nature to all living creatures on the earth. It was a public relations exercise, and the fact that the signatories were convinced of a prechristian origin for the twelfth-century tree under which they met is only one of the many absurdities involved. But it would be short-sighted of a mere antiquarian to heckle from the sidelines. What are a few centuries here and there when the neo-pagan salvation of the planet is in question? Yet I feel that the truth should also count for something.

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# Sacred Trees in the Bristol Landscape

Trees have a power denied to other plant life. There is a global ubiquity in their being guardians, possessors of latent powers, resting places for human souls and silent central players in the affairs of mankind. A culture without its sacred groves and 'world trees' is scarcely a culture at all. Trees have excited the passing interest of folklorists but, with few exceptions, there appears to have been little attempt to go further and construct a model of the distribution and nature of sacred trees in the English landscape. The very mortality of trees and the ease with which they can be erased from the landscape and the memory is no doubt a key factor in their peripheral role. However, through the topographical and place-name archive the memory of our sacred trees lives on, peppering the modern landscape with a tantalising glimpse of what must have been a common phenomenon.

By taking the former county of Avon as an example I hope to demonstrate the surprising amount of surviving tree lore and the degree to which trees have sometimes become repositories for human souls. I hope too that the material I present will inspire others to delve beneath familiar landscapes and resurrect the world of the sacred tree.

## Individual trees

That most famous of West Country sacred trees - the Glastonbury thorn - was widely

*PHIL QUINN has devoted much time over the last fifteen years to researching the local history and folklore of the Bristol area. He has contributed to recent issues of 3rd Stone and forthcoming issues of The Ley Hunter and the magazine of the Norton-Radstock historical society. This article looks at historical and contemporary beliefs related to trees, using examples from the rather short-lived county of Avon.*

sought after for cuttings, several of which graced the large houses of the Bristol region, at Compton Bishop and Nailsea Court to name but two, where they flowered at Christmas Eve and Epiphany respectively, the blossoms falling by morning. 'The Holy Thorn of Hill' however claimed to be the original sacred thorn derived from the staff of Joseph of Arimathea [1] and scorn was cast on Glastonbury's claim. It was undoubtedly more ancient than any of the descendants of the Glastonbury tree and, until its reported death in 1971, this straggling specimen grew amid the coastal levels of the Vale of Berkeley, far from any habitation thus raising the suspicion that it was a native sacred tree growing on a site that had been holy since pagan times.

Hawthorns in general seem to have been seen as benevolent trees with several parishes having retained the place-name 'Beggars Bush' on their boundaries to mark shelters for travellers and mendicants, and these trees were often old hawthorns. A far more esoteric role must have been played by the ancient thorn tree that once grew at the centre of early medieval Bristol, on a site later occupied by the City's High

Cross [2].

The interchangeability of tree and cross also occurred in the parishes of Wraxall and Walton-in-Gordano where 'Cross Trees' - great fern-bedecked elms - grew amid the foundations of medieval crosses. In Wraxall's case this was the site of a six-day medieval fair that commenced on Hallowe'en [3].

An avowedly sacred tree grew south of Bath at the Carlingcott crossroads and was described in 1765 by architect and mystic John Wood as an 'Object of Adoration' [4]. A local field name, 'Stow Trees', may preserve its name, the first element meaning 'meeting place' [5]. Could this tree have been a moot site like the Dodington Ash on the Cotswolds at which crossroads the Grunbald's Ash hundred court would meet [6]?

Wood also informs us that in Bath itself there grew the Bel-tree, just to the south of the healing springs, and which he rather tendentiously associates with a solar divinity [7]. Equally intriguing is Wood's reference to a site on the Wiltshire border where a well and a pair of ash trees were 'dedicated to Mars' [8]. It is likely that Wood, a noted Druid, was reinterpreting native folk belief into the



neoclassical framework of his time and adopting the Roman habit of equating native gods and spirits with those familiar to the 'civilised' world.

Less problematic are the instances of 'holy tree' as a place-name - in the hamlet of Hallatrow and in a Yatton field name 'Hallow trow' [9]. Yatton was also the setting for 'Robin Hood's Bower', an arbour of green boughs erected in the churchyard for the church ale festivities [10].

Churchyards are, of course, the natural setting for ancient yews and north-west Somerset was particularly renowned for its venerable specimens. Many still survive and one, at Winscombe on the north slope of Mendip, was the subject of an inquest by a special committee whenever a branch fell off or was damaged [11], a procedure redolent of taboos on haring sacred trees. Occasionally an ancient yew grew on a parish boundary, for example, that between Cromhall and Charfield. Old boundary charters show how other named trees were important features of the landscape, many remaining so into modern times such as the 'King's Thorn' on Bathampton Down and the 'Stump Elm' (a 23 feet 3 inch diameter monster) that stood between the parishes of Midsomer Norton and Radstock [12].

Boundary trees would sometimes have a cross etched into their trunk to mark where the gospel would be read on Rogationtide walks around the parish bounds and, although actual trees will have gone, evidence remains in such field names as Gospel Bush, Wapley (13).

## Hanging trees

The human experience of trees also has a darker side, linked by acts of violence, either through public execution or the secretive nocturnal burial of a suicide at the crossroads. There appear to be few passive transitions between human



Bleeding Elm and Rowberrow Tump, Radstock.  
Photograph by Phil Quinn.

spirits and trees, apart from a couple of witch ghosts, thus reflecting a global pattern where great suffering and dread must pass before the soul migrates from flesh to wood.

Ash and elm were the major hanging trees in the area with oak playing a subsidiary role - 'Hangman's Ash' remains a not-uncommon field name in South Gloucestershire - while elms were popular gallows trees in Somerset, with some drawing considerable reverence. At Corston, near Bath, the 'Hangman's Tree' which saw service after the Monmouth Rebellion was also known as the 'Trysting Tree' where lovers would rendezvous after dark [14].

At Wrington the 'Hanging Tree' was noted for the galloping of a phantom horse which haunted the lanes running from the crossroads at which the tree stood. When this tree was killed by Dutch elm disease in the 1970s many villagers felt it expedient to keep its dangerous rotting hulk standing rather than incur bad luck by felling it [15]. Chips taken from a hangman's tree and worn as amulets were believed to be an effective remedy for ague and other illnesses [16].

The executed corpse was often buried beneath the tree it had hung from and here it shared much of the characteristics of suicides who, until 1882, were deemed unfit for Christian burial. A wooden stake was driven through the heart of the suicide to prevent its ghost walking or becoming a vampire. Sometimes this stake was believed to sprout and grow into a tree haunted by the spirit of the corpse at its roots - a remarkably direct route through which the human soul could pass. Such a scenario is offered at Little Elm, Farinborough, widely seen as an eerie place haunted by tragic figures of suicides and ne'er-do-wells [17].

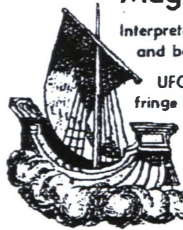
An undisclosed fate befell a woman whose ghost would be seen every Hallowe'en by an ancient oak that stood on the boundary between the parishes of Flax Bourton and Long Ashton [18]. This tree stood next to 'Puxpit' field [19], a name probably meaning 'goblin's well' or 'goblin's pit' - which suggests a site long associated with the supernatural.

## Trees on barrows

Two of the best preserved round barrows in the region had



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trees with bloody associations. At Barrow Hill, Bitton an old elm which once grew out of the mound was said to be the stake driven through the heart of Benanus, a Roman soldier who committed suicide at a crossroads which was here prior to the barrow. A Victorian poet who sat beneath its boughs was compelled to verse by its spirit of place:

A mystic tree  
It spake to me  
With sad and solemn  
sound . . . [20]

Some ten miles to the south-east another prominent tumulus - the Rowbarrow, near Radstock - also had a great tree, 'The Bleeding Elm' growing upon its summit. Legend declares that Cromwell fought on the mound, which originally

marked the burial of a tribal leader killed in a very bloody battle. Folklorist Ruth Tongue recorded that the elm 'has an uncanny reputation. If it is cut with a knife it bleeds, but if you are so reckless as to touch it with anything other than iron and steel you will sooner or later die very bloodily.' [21] This elm, now replaced by a lime, was perhaps the most potent of the region's 'taboo trees'. Similar traditions may once have been woven around the 'Battle Elm' at Oldbury-on-Severn which stood beneath the ancient church site of St Arilda, itself replacing a temple of Jupiter [22].

## Woodlands

Trees *en masse* engender rather different aspects than the solitary grandeur or menace of lone individuals. In forest-based cultures there are always certain areas of woodland which are felt to be uncanny, where contact with the supernatural is facilitated, where spirits are dangerous or where bad magic lies in wait for the unwary. These are the 'sacred groves' of prechristian peoples, and the subject of romance and whimsy to both the ancient and modern mind. Evidence for sacred woodland is provided by our old friends: place-names, folklore and archaeology, and in the Bristol landscape two main threads become apparent.

### 1: Haunted and holy woods

By fortuitous quirks of the historical record two south Gloucestershire holy woods can be identified. The first is in the parish of Oldbury-on-Severn where the field name 'Halliers' is a corruption of *halyhurst* i.e. 'holy wood' [23]. Several other 'Halliers' place-names occur in the Bristol region but documentary evidence of early spellings, which could link them to 'holy hurst', have not survived.

Not far from Oldbury in the

Cotswold parish of Horton is the field of Great Grimesgrove which has been translated as 'Woden's or goblin's wood' [24]. Significantly, perhaps, the old corpse path from Horton village to the sequestered parish church skirts the edge of this field [25].

Closer to Bristol itself, in the western part of Pucklechurch, a small patch of the once-extensive Shortwood survives and is haunted by the unlikely ghost of a man with a bucket on his head! [26] Far more sinister was the shade of a black-faced woman who haunted a spinney near the Fairy Toot long barrow at Nempnett Thrubwell, for she was not content with a passive role, being feared as an eater of children who dared enter her wood [27].

### 2: Nimlets

Nempnett Thrubwell is one of a clutch of similar place-names in north-east Somerset and the Cotswolds which may stem from a Celtic word *nymet*, usually meaning 'sacred grove'. However a note of caution must be acknowledged for an Old English word for 'small plain' can give rise to a comparable name [28] and the landscape of north-east Somerset is dotted with such features. Caution aside, eight place-names that can variously be written Nempnett, Nimlet, Nimblets, Nemlett or Nymptney have survived. Four of these are associated with ancient sacred sites and it is not impossible that a fifth - Nempnett Thrubwell itself - derived from the haunted wood adjacent to Fairy Toot.

Taking those Nimlet sites which have ancillary sacred features we can follow a south-westerly arc starting at the foot of the Cotswolds with 'Nimblets', a name given to several hillside fields that lie below the long barrow and possible stone circle site at Charny Down Farm, Batheaston [29]. In Bath a site now occupied by the Royal United Hospital was once called

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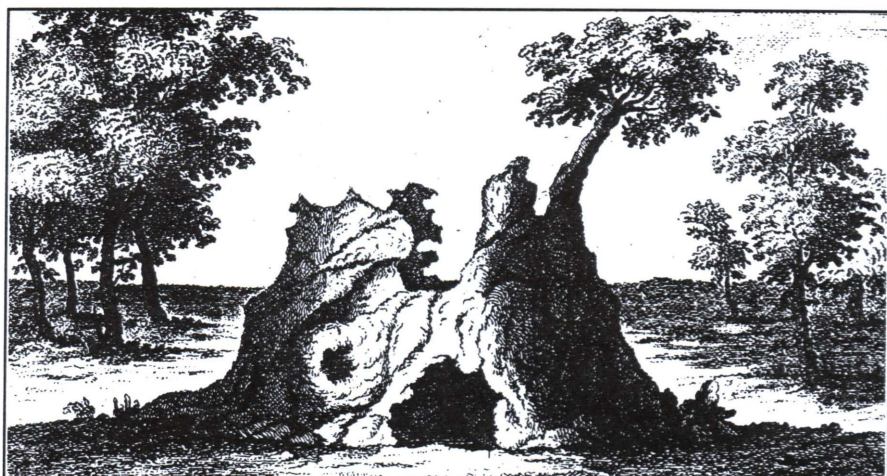
'Nemlett' [30] and was the site of a minor Roman cemetery placed close to Locksbrook stream where votive Celtic metalwork has been discovered [31]. At Tinsbury a field behind the parish church was called Nemlet [32] and was haunted by the ghost of a medieval figure called Sir Barnabus who would ride around the field at the dead of night [33]. To the south-west, on the scarp of Widcombe Hill, in West Harptree are a number of scattered fields bearing the names Nimblett, including a patch of ancient woodland called Nimblett Coppice [34], all close to the Burlledge hillfort, a site which the county archaeologist feels could well produce evidence of 'a complex ceremonial landscape' [35].

For these Nimlet sites to have such striking associations is surely beyond coincidence and demands further enquiry at the remaining sites.

## Other significant trees

More artificial groupings of trees could also attract the supernatural for stately avenues of lime on Mendip harboured the ghosts of women who died in the midsts of tragedy [36; 37]. Uppermost among the non-tragic witch ghosts associated with trees was that of Patty Parsons who haunted the northern side of Worlebury Hill, Weston-super-Mare. In life Parsons was believed to take the form of a white dog and such a creature was seen in the woods in the 1940s and reported as the witch's ghost [38]. Another phantom white dog haunted Pier Copse in nearby Clevedon where it was seen to disappear by a large ash tree [39].

There is a double potency to the presence of sacred trees when they are in association with other sacred landscape features, although such situations are rare in the Bristol region. Evidence for an association with holy wells is



The stump of the Watch Elm, Stoke Gifford, Gloucestershire in 1765.  
By John Player.

locally scant, several 'Ashwell' place-names survive and a number of 'Stockwell' names may refer to stumps or 'stocks' of singular trees that once stood by. A spring in Chew Magna called 'Wriggleswell' preserves in its name the dialect word for Rowan tree [40], a species believed locally to guard against witches.

Apart from these instances only St Aldam's Ash at Pucklechurch can enliven a rather poor record. This ash no longer stands but once grew near St Aldam's Well, the site of a miracle cure by the Anglo-Saxon saint. Aldam required shade for those gathered at the well who had come to be cured and hear him preach. No shade being found he struck his staff in the ground which miraculously sprouted and grew into a fine tree. A similar tale is told of St Congar at Congresbury, where his yew staff burst into leaf and formed the ancient tree known as 'St Congar's Walking Stick', of which it was somewhat cryptically said:

'A green yew is there; not a dry stick, nor one which can be held in the hand.' [41]

The saint himself was said to be buried beneath the tree in a golden coffin [42]; the story of Congar thus demonstrates a parallel with the 'suicide trees' where the soul and body of the dead sustains the tree and grants it a supernatural aura.

Could trees have once been thought to be sanctified or appeased by sacrifice and the presence of a body at their roots?

## Healing trees

That some trees were not simply brooding presences but had powers to help people is evidenced by the folklore surrounding the ash. Upon being bitten by an adder Somerset people would suck the wound, spit and say the charm:

Ashing tree, ashing tree  
Take this bite away from me.  
[43]

Until as recently as 1945, ash was used to cure ailing children by passing them through a cleft sapling which was then carefully watched throughout the individual's life. If the tree died the person would be in great danger but if it flourished all was well. The ancient and arcane ritual involved in the 'split-ash cure' had to be observed in strict detail. The child was taken in silence to the chosen tree before dawn on May Day morning, although New Year's Eve was also used. The tree was cut vertically and held open with wedges although none of the living wood could be cut from the tree. A virgin held one end of the naked child and a boy the other, passing the patient backwards and forwards three times each way east to



west without allowing the child to touch the tree. Once completed a prayer would be said, the tree bound up with string, plastered with mud and the party would return home in silence, forbidden to tell anyone that the child had been treated until it was recovered to full health [44; 45].

A variation on this theme was the ash in the centre of Weston-super-Mare, which had been cleft but not healed up, thus leaving a circular gap in its trunk. Children were passed through the tree to improve their health and it seems to have been available for anyone to use [46]. Other species of tree may have had similar beliefs attached to them, as occurred in West Sussex, where long life was bestowed on children passed 'through the branches of certain Field Maples' [47].

## The value of sacred trees

The tree has served many roles in human culture - protector, avenger, healer, spirit house, provider of food, fuel and shelter - and it is probable that many of the otherworldly elements of its character are of extreme animistic antiquity. For such impermanent features to have survived in the lore of the densely-populated and intensively-farmed landscape of the Bristol region is a testament to their power, maintaining a bond between humanity and nature that has been put under increasingly intense strain but has nevertheless survived. Genuine living holy trees or their successors are now extremely rare in the landscape but the veneration and respect still shown to other trees in general, especially those of great age, is surely more than a modern self-conscious reinvention of an ancient theme.

# Sacred and Significant Trees of the Bristol Region

## Holy Trees

1 Holy Thorn of Hill	Hill	ST628971
2 Holy Thorn	Compton Bishop	ST396552
3 'Glastonbury Thorn'	Nailsea	ST457682
4 'Glastonbury Thorns' (x3)	Bath	ST728657
5 Bel Tree	Bath	ST750646
6 'Mars Ashes'	Box	ST812680?
7 Hallatrow High	Littleton	ST637571
8 Hallow Trow	Yatton	ST378637

## Cross Trees

9 'High Cross Precursor'	Bristol	ST589730
10 Cross Tree	Wraxall	ST491719
11 Cross Tree	Weston-in-Gordano	ST447743
12 'Stow Tree'	Peasedown St John	ST696581
13 'Old Okes Cross'	Kingswood	ST645739
14 Dodington Ash	Dodington	ST758784

## Hanging/Haunted/Suicide Trees

15 Hangmans Ash	Alveston	ST648840
16 Hangmans Ash	Marshfield	ST798716
17 Gallows Ash	Kilmersdon	ST690524
18 Hanging Tree	Congresbury	ST450636?
19 Hangman's Tree	Corston	ST693653
20 Hanging Tree	Wrington	ST474630
21 Hangman's Oak	Abbots Leigh	ST552731
22 Palmer's Elm	Puxton	ST395564
23 Little Elm	Farmborough	ST655612
24 'Ben's Elm	Bitton	ST678694
25 Bleeding Elm	Norton-Radstock	ST690561
26 'Haunted Tree'	Pensford	ST616644
27 Lime avenue East	Harptree	ST562551
28 'Haunted avenue	Winscombe	ST432577
29 'Haunted Yew hedges'	Henbury	ST563787
30 'Haunted avenue'	Bishopsworth	ST571690
31 'Haunted Oak'	Flax Bourton/Long Ashton	ST520691

## Haunted and Holy Woods

32 'Fairy Toot Spinney'	Butcombe/Nempnett Thrubwell	ST519618?
33 Halliers	Oldbury-on-Severn	ST633931
34 (?)Halliers Moor	Weston-super-Mare	ST367613
35 Sally-in-the-Woods	Bathford	ST794655
36 Shortwood	Pucklechurch	ST678761
37 Great Grimesgrove	Horton	ST761849
38 Worlebury Woods	Kewstoke	ST330231
39 Pier Copse	Clevedon	ST403718
40 Friary Wood	Hinton Charterhouse	ST787590
41 (?)White Ox Mead	Wellow	ST714580
42 Ancient Oak grove	Hinton Charterhouse	ST766591

Furthermore the historic sites of ancient sacred trees and woods may mark places of power just as important as the stones, wells and churches that have survived them.

Of course this is hard to prove but the challenge of doing so is a reward in itself and an overdue acknowledgement of a neglected part of our sacred landscape.



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## Nimlets

43 Nimblett	Batheaston	ST763687
44 Neimnnett	Thrubwell	ST533604
45 Nimblett Hill	Marshfield	ST795723
46 Nimblett	West Harptree	ST587583
47 Nympney	Farington Gurney	ST630555
48 Nemlet	Timsbury	ST666586
49 Nemlet	Cold Ashton	ST735715
50 Neimlett	Bath	ST729656

## Probable Holy Well Trees

51 Stockwell	Horfield	ST597784
52 Stockwell	Hawkesbury	ST796923
53 Stockwell	Mangotsfield	ST659771?
54 Stockwell	Aust	ST606903
55 aescwellan	Westbury	ST5676?
56 Ashwell	Whitchutch	ST618687
57 Ashwells	East Harptree	ST563544
58 haesllwellan	Westbury/Almondsbury?	ST594815
59 St Aldam's Ash	Pucklechurch	ST704773
60 Holywater Elm	Writhlington	ST7054
61 Wriggleswell	Chew Magna	ST561638

See also [6] above.

## Church and Boundary Trees

62 Yew	Winscombe	ST411566
63 St Congar's Walking Stick, Congresbury		ST435637
64 Yew	Cromhall/Charfield	ST707913
65 King's Thorn	Bathampton	ST7764?
66 Stump Eln	Norton Radstock	ST675542?
67 Gospel Bush	Wapley	ST714792
68 Battle Eln	Oldbury-on-Severn	ST608918
69 Staple Hill Oak	Staple Hill	ST657759?
70 Beggars Bush	Abbots Leigh	ST552731
71 Beggars Bush	West Harptree	ST552568
72 Beggars Bush	Iron Acton	ST697848

See also [13] above.

## Miscellaneous

73 Split Ash	Weston-super-Mare	ST320314
74 Robin Hood's Bower	Yatton	ST431654
75 Holy Bush Orchard	Swainswick	ST761672
76 Tortworth Chestnut	Tortworth	ST704932

- Spade' in *Clevedon Mercury* 9th February 1984
- 28: Dr Michael Costen, Bristol University pers. com. April 1995
- 29: Batheaston Tithe Awards 1840 (TA635-641)
- 30: Weston Tithe Awards 1844
- 31: Rev Prebendary Scarth 'Notes on a pair of Celtic spoons found near Weston, Bath in 1866' in *Bath Antiquarian Field Club (Proc.)* Vol.II 1870-73

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37: Francis Knight *The Heart of Mendip* 1915 p100

38: John Bailey 'Round About' in *Weston Mercury* 13th Aug 1985

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40: Frederick Wood *Chew Magna* SANHS Northern Branch, 1897 p10

41: John Bailey 'Round About' in *Weston Mercury* 14th Sept 1956

42: John Bailey 'Round About' in *Weston Mercury* 27th Feb 1953

44: John Bailey 'Round About' in *Weston Mercury* 7th Dec 1973

45: John Bailey 'Round About' in *Weston Mercury* 6th Mar 1959

46: John Bailey 'Round About' in *Weston Mercury* 23rd Jan 1987

47: Vincent Stuckey Lean *Collectanea. English and Other Proverbs and Folklore* Vol.2 part 2 1903 p639

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Features connected with nature court powerful beliefs and weird tales. Worldwide trees were and are venerated and linked to myths and legends. People still 'touch wood' to avoid misfortune. Many tales relating to tree lore have been told in the Peak District of Derbyshire; this article draws attention to just a few examples.

## Apples and mistletoe

It is said that it is unlucky to fell an apple tree. Could this belief have evolved from a connection with the biblical Garden of Eden? Or is it because this was a tree which supported mistletoe (thought to bear especially valuable magical agents - an antidote to poison and able to restore fertility to barren livestock)?

## Ash veneration

The ash was also venerated. The ash is known as the 'Tree of the Peak' and occurs in numerous place-names throughout Derbyshire: Ashbourne (ash beside a stream), Ashford in the Water (ash beside the ford); One Ash Grange, and Monyash (many ash trees). Although the ash tree was considered to be a good tree, they were also deemed to attract lightning. A rhyme advised: 'Avoid the ash it courts the flash'.

There was a belief that a lame animal would be cured if a live shrew was entombed inside a hole bored into an ash tree. As the shrew died and decomposed so the lame animal recovered. The cure for human warts was achieved by pricking the wart with a pin. The pin was then stuck into the ash tree while speaking the words: 'Ashen tree, ashen tree, pray buy these warts from me.'

Another ritual involved passing a youngster through the cleft in a tree as a cure for a hernia. If a man ever cut down an ash tree he would once have been banished from the parish.

PAUL WAIN has always lived in the White Peak and in recent years begun to study the folklore and archaeology of the district. He has previously written about Arbor Low henge for *Mercian Mysteries*.

## The Sheldon Duck

One of the weirdest of the Peak legends concerns an ash tree which stood in the village of Sheldon near Bakewell. In 1601 a number of villagers witnessed a duck fly over the village green and settle in an ash tree. The tale handed down told how the bird became trapped inside a crevice in the trunk and perished. For the next three hundred years this ash tree was known as the 'Duck Tree' until it was felled because of being considered dangerous. It was then taken to Wilson's timber yard and saw mill at Ashford in the Water. When sawn open the opposing faces on the two planks were found to be ingrained with a cross-section of full-sized duck about one inch thick, eight inches wide and twenty-one inches from beak to tail. The wood was perforated in the area of the brain, lung and liver, possibly because of organs rotting in the wood.

The wooden boards were displayed in Sheldon Post Office but were later polished by the timber merchant and mounted in a mantelpiece at his home, Great Batch Hall. Years later postcards of the 'Sheldon Duck' were sold in Ashford.

## A prophetic beech

A strange tale of a prophetic nature exists a few miles away at Hassop Hall regarding a beech tree. The Hall was once owned by the Countess of Newburgh, born into the old Peak family of Eyre. Ownership of the Hassop state and the Earldom of Newburgh was the focal point of long-running legal disputes. In 1865 the Bishop of Lichfield held an inquiry, having



# Tree Veneration in the Peak District

discovered that entries and even whole pages in various parish records had been removed - all related to the Eyre family.

Many years passed and various parties tried to prove their entitlement to both property and position of power. One candidate arrived from Australia to take possession of the hall, only to be banned from further trespass by the courts. A local Samuel Eyre from Great Hucklow, considered to be eccentric, was convinced Hassop was his. But he was not taken seriously by the locals.

A story evolved that a particular beech tree was some guardian. When the wind blew from the west a listener would hear the following utterings from the rustling above: 'All hail true heir that stills my voice.' Others heard it to be 'All hail the Eyre that stills my voice'.

In years following the legend of the beech continued by telling that buried documents would be revealed when the beech was cut down by the rightful heir but only he could complete the task. Local lore adds that numerous attempts were made over the years to fell the tree but 'no sooner had the axe been taken up than some accident happens to the would-be destroyer'.

## The Edden Tree

Just north of Bradwell village at a road junction heading from Hope and the B6049 (SK175818) stands an inn. A battle is believed to have taken place near here between the fifth and ninth centuries AD. A king or chieftain known as

Edwin was captured here. After the battle he was hanged from a tree. The 'Edden' or 'Eden Tree' near Bradwell is the name of the place where this long-lost tree once stood. The species of tree was unfortunately unrecorded. However, surrounding place-names like 'Rebellion Knoll' and 'Gore Lane' keep alive hints that the past was far from peaceful.

## Elder

The tree on which Judas Iscariot is said to have hanged himself, the elder, was once disliked and considered unlucky. It was called a 'witches tree' and the foliage never taken indoors. It was believed by Derbyshire people that Christ was crucified on a cross made from elder wood.

## Sympathetic death

Cotton in the Elms in southern Derbyshire has a sad tale focusing on one of its trees. On 31st March 1644 a soldier who had deserted his regiment, Philip Greensmith, was executed on a tree. It is said that afterwards the tree slowly died in sympathy.

## Helpful hazel

In folklore hazel is a benevolent tree. During medieval times, wands of hazel were used to summon fairies in a ritual where three wands were buried 'under some hill where you suppose fayries haunt'. A forked wand, which had to be cut on the feast of St John

(Midsummer), could locate fairies and find buried treasure. The wood from this tree is a preferred material for dowsing rods.

## Bountiful hawthorn

Hawthorn is connected with fertility and pagan springtime customs. These are probably linked to its early flowering. The mythical 'Green Man' is often depicted in carvings and paintings intertwined with hawthorn leaves and branches. By growing hawthorn it was believed your home would be guarded against evil spirits and storms. However, this tree too was considered unlucky if any part of the hawthorn was brought indoors.

Among other names like the 'May hawthorn', it has been known in the Peak as the 'Bread and cheese tree' as the young leaves are edible and can be eaten raw.

## The tree wedding

A lovely story exists from the north of Derbyshire, although the exact location is not known. Two young people were crossing the fields on a wild day to be married in a village church. As they continued, the weather deteriorated and they took shelter under a large tree. Moments later they were accompanied by an Irish priest, also sheltering from the storm. As the storm raged he noticed the couple looked sad.

Upon enquiring, they said 'We were on our way to church to be married but the storm has hindered our journey and we are afraid it is too late.'

'If that is all,' said the priest, 'I can marry you.' using his prayer book they were married under the tree as the storm continued to howl. The ceremony came to an end after he said to each:

*'Under a tree in stormy weather,  
I married this man and maid together;  
Let him alone who rules the thunder  
Put this man and maid asunder.'*

## Moaning mandrake

A mandrake tree was said to have been evident in the last century at the Hagge (now a farm house) which lies one-and-a-half miles north-east of New Whittington (SK411376). The tree was venerated by the local people; it is said that it dated from Henry VIII's time. The mandrake, rare in Britain, has long deeply-forked roots which were perceived to resemble a demon or human body. Folklore states that if someone were to break a piece off the tree it would bleed and moan as if a demon was talking.

It is believed that before the actual tree grew a ghost frequented the area. When the ghost was laid to rest the tree was planted. As years passed it became quite an attraction. But a decision to cut the tree down resulted in a eerie moaning. The tree was finally made recumbent in 1883 when a great storm uprooted it.

Probably the oak is the most admired tree throughout history. When Britain was under Roman occupation they found it was sacred to the Druids, who worshipped in oak groves. The tree is supposed to protect property from lightning. A cure for toothache was sought by hitting a nail into an oak tree.

King Charles II hid in an oak tree to evade capture and this

event was commemorated on 29th May or Oak Apple Day. Although Oak Apple Day is generally unremembered, the Castleton Garland festival still takes place on this date.

When Queen Victoria (then still only a princess) stayed at Chatsworth in 1832 an oak was planted to mark her visit.

## Magical mountain ash

Peak District lore cradles a special place for the rowan or mountain ash. This tree was said to have magical powers and guard against witchcraft and the evil eye. These beliefs date back to the Anglo-Saxon era or earlier. Many women of Derbyshire always used to carry a cross made of 'witch wiggins' (another name for mountain ash) tucked under their dress for magical protection.

If a rowan was planted in your garden witches would keep away from your abode. Rowan twigs were placed across butter tubs, the tubs also made of the same wood as a precautionary measure against bewitchment.

In Bradfield (near Sheffield) sprigs of this sacred tree are used as talismans for good luck. The berries of the rowan also had a use and were fed to livestock to ease the birth of their young.

Superstitions were also rife within the lead mining community of the Peak. In the eighteenth century 'bits of wicken' (rowan things) were placed by a steam pumping engine in lead workings at Calver Sough to 'ease the minds of the miners'. This was because previously the equipment kept breaking down and was considered to have succumbed to witchcraft. Planting rowan trees near the mine entrance was thought to improve the yield of ore.

## Wordsworth and the two brothers

Roughly two miles north-west of Matlock (which means meeting or moot oak) is Oaker

Hill on which is a lonely sycamore tree. In 1838 Wordsworth wrote a sonnet entitled 'The Keepsake' about this tree

*Tis said that to the brow of yon  
fair hill  
Two brothers climb, and  
turning face from face  
Not one more look exchanging,  
grief to still  
Or feed each planted on that  
lonely place  
A chosen tree, then eager to  
fulfil  
Their course, like two new born  
rivers,  
they in opposite direction urged  
their way  
Down from the far-seen mount.  
No blast might kill  
Or blight that fond memorial;  
the trees grew  
And now entwine their arms;  
but ne'er again  
Embraced these brothers upon  
earth's wide plain;  
Nor aught of mutual joy or  
sorrow knew  
Until their spirits mingled in the  
sea  
That to itself takes all-eternity.*

Recent legends are said to differ slightly from Wordsworth's account of Oaker Hill. Later versions state how two brothers climbed to the summit of the hill and both planted a tree before separating. One brother succeeded in life and the tree he planted lived and thrived; the other failed in life and his tree died with his dreams.

There are two other tales linked to the tree. One is that a man named Shore, a local surname, planted the sycamores with the notion that when he died his coffin would be made of the wood. The final tale is that just one tree was planted to mark King George V's coronation in 1911.

## Venerable yews

This brief survey concludes with the yew tree. Once sacred to pagans, they continued to be planted in Christian churchyards throughout Britain. The yew



was considered to be a symbol of everlasting life. Some early records maintain it was planted in churchyards to protect the place from storms born out of witchcraft.

The wood of the mature tree was used for English long-bows and was thus of considerable value. Greenery from the yew was also widely used at Easter for the decoration of churches.

Years ago, anyone who cut timber from churchyards faced the risk of being excommunicated. Clergy were only allowed to take the wood for church repairs, a law reinforced by a statute of 1707 with heavy fines imposed as penalties for such offences.

There are many old yew trees throughout Derbyshire. In the churchyard at Churchtown near Matlock is a yew tree believed to be 1,800 years old. The yew at Doveridge in the south-west of the county is estimated to be around 1,400 years old. When last measured the trunk (now hollow) had a circumference of 22 feet, with

the outer branches encircling an area of 260 feet. Robin Hood and Maid Marion are said to have wed under this tree.

It is the Darley Yew though that is considered the oldest and most famous in the Peak. Roughly 2,000 years old, it is accompanied by a plaque stating:

'There can be little doubt that this grand old tree has given shelter to the early Britons when planning construction of the dwellings which they erected not many yards to the west of its trunk. To the Romans who built up funeral pyres for their slain companions just clear of its branches. To the Saxons, converted perchance to the true faith by the preaching of Bishop Diuna beneath its pleasant shade. To the Norman masons carving their quaint sculptures to form the first stone house of prayer and to the host of Christian worshippers, who from that day to this have been bourn under its hoary limbs in women's arms to the baptismal font and then on men's

shoulders to their last sleeping place in the soil that gave it birth.'

When the tree was measured at the beginning of the nineteenth century its trunk measured 34 feet 8 inches. Old age has since caused shrinkage; however the tree will continue to flourish for some time to come.

[Paul Wain's article was written without knowledge of Jeremy Harte's research revealed at the beginning of this issue of *At the Edge* - R.N.T.]

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# The Green Man

## Variations on the Theme

*RUTH WYLIE is a self-confessed 'Green Maniac' who has spent much time and effort in locating and photographing previously unknown carvings of Green Men.*

*At the Edge is privileged to be able to publish a selection of these images. None have been previously published elsewhere.*

**From top: Fourteenth century sedilia spandrel, St Martin's, Thompson, Norfolk.** A college of priests was founded here in 1349, which explains the richly decorated sedilia in a rural church. There are Green Men in three spandrels, each featuring a different species of foliage. Specific plants did not appear until the late thirteenth century, when the typically English oak, hawthorn, ivy, etc. asserted themselves. Do the curious chequered sacks beneath his chin represent fir cones or grapes? (There are similar motifs on a corbel in Ripon Minster.)

**Twelfth century capital underneath tower, St Michael's, Melbourne, Derbyshire.** Although 'The Green Man' and 'Sheela-na-Gig' are often supportive neighbours on a Norman church, a composite carving is unusual. Does this intimacy infer a

'The Green Man', a name coined by Lady Raglan in 1939, is a mediaeval image usually found in churches. Carved in stone or wood, depicted on stained glass, illuminated manuscripts and where else, he can be recognised as a face, often grotesque, with foliage sprouting from his mouth, nose, eyes or ears. Alternatively, he may be a face composed entirely of leaves. Exterior or interior, he features on capitals, corbels, choir stalls, bench ends, fonts, screens, roof bosses - indeed, any surface open to ornamentation.

The earliest known examples are in the art of Classical Rome, from where the idea seems to have moved northwards, to be adopted by Christianity and spread far and wide along the pilgrimage routes. The Green Man vanished with the 'Old Faith' after the Reformation. By the time of his reappearance, on seventeenth century memorials and eighteenth century Scottish gravestones, the emphasis had shifted, the purpose redirected.

For the Victorians, he played a major role in their church restorations and as a decorative motif on street architecture. Even today, when he enjoys a revival, his significance can be manipulated to suit our particular needs. The imagery has captured the imagination of modern artists working in various media. Surely change and development guarantees his survival!

However, the mighty questions of who, what and why - the search for a meaning behind the symbol - have no answer yet. The lack of substantial evidence leaves the significance open to individual interpretation. This unknown quality makes the study so exciting! What a wide range of moods the Green Men express, which invite equally varied responses. Let the Green Man hold on to his secrets, remain a mystery, for therein lies his power. Like a god who has many facets in one, he gathers all unto himself and his strength is assured.

liaison promoting fertility, both of the land and its people? But do we interpret their unity as a celebration, a supplication or a timely warning!

**Fifteenth century capital in nave, St Swithun's, Woodbury, Devon.**

'Green Men' vehemently defend their cause from all four corners of this gorgeous capital, linked by foliage between ears and mouths.

What of the sprightly lizard snaffling fruit? Has he lost direction since the serpents of earlier centuries? Beasts writhe from the mouth at St Gabriel-Brecy, France and a corbel on the old Coventry cathedral. Foliage from the ears occurs again at Shirwell, North Devon.

**Fifteenth century misericord, Holy Trinity, Wysall, Nottinghamshire.**

A jovial forthright character!









**Above: Font, c.1160, St Mary's, Stottesdon, Shropshire.**

'Green cats' were a popular device for sculpture in the twelfth century. This choice suggests a strong influence drawn from illuminated manuscripts, where the animals served as mainsprings for foliate scrolls and swirling interlaced patterns.

Romanesque sculpture of this area compares with its counterpart in Saintonge, France, which indicates regular communication at this time between craftsmen on either side of the Channel. Linked cats form a border around the font at Lullington, Somerset.

*Opposite, top left:*

**Nineteenth century arm rest, chancel, St Helen's, Leverton, Lincolnshire.**

How well this face simulates a mood of painful resignation often expressed in mediaeval work, but the sharp edges are clues indicating a Victorian imitation. Foliage streaming from the tear ducts is unusual.

*Opposite top right:*

**Early fifteenth century 'poppy head' finial on choir stalls, St Mary's, Nantwich, Cheshire.**

'Poppy-heads' (from the French word 'poupees') are finials to bench ends, which rise prominently above the stalls. From this elevation, 'Green Men' reign, proudly supervising the action in every direction. They carry authority; who can escape their penetrating gaze? There are fine examples in Chester and Wakefield cathedrals, but this striking figure-head is the king of them all (there are few distinctly female examples).

*Opposite bottom left:*

**Nineteenth century corbel in nave, St Peter's, Codford, Wiltshire.**

What fun the Victorian carver had in creating this fanciful arrangement of leaves and flowers. Is my imagination running wild, or can you also see the face therein?

*Opposite bottom right:*

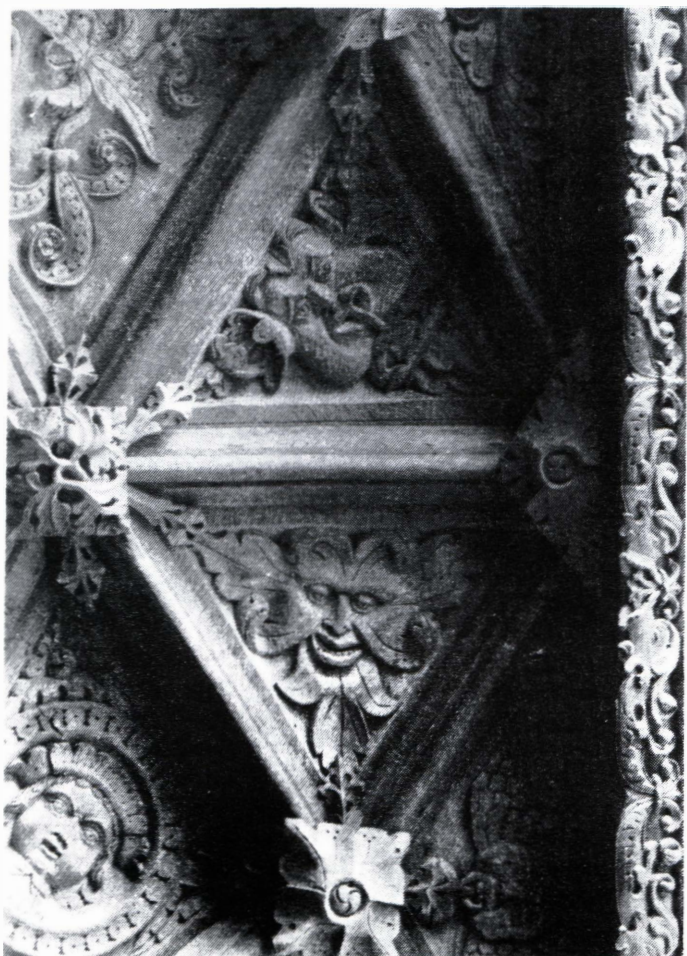
**Tomb of Sir William Sharington (died 1553), Lacock Abbey, Wiltshire.**

Built originally for a community of Augustinian nuns, Sir William Sharington bought Lacock Abbey in 1539 for £783, and converted the building into a stately mansion. Fortunately, he spared the original chapter house, sacristy and vaulted cloisters, the latter supporting fine bosses, including several Green Men. Although portraits exist of Sir William, they bear no resemblance to these profiles, which discounts portraiture. Heads with leaves for hair enhance memorials at Sparsholt, Oxfordshire and Winchester Cathedral.

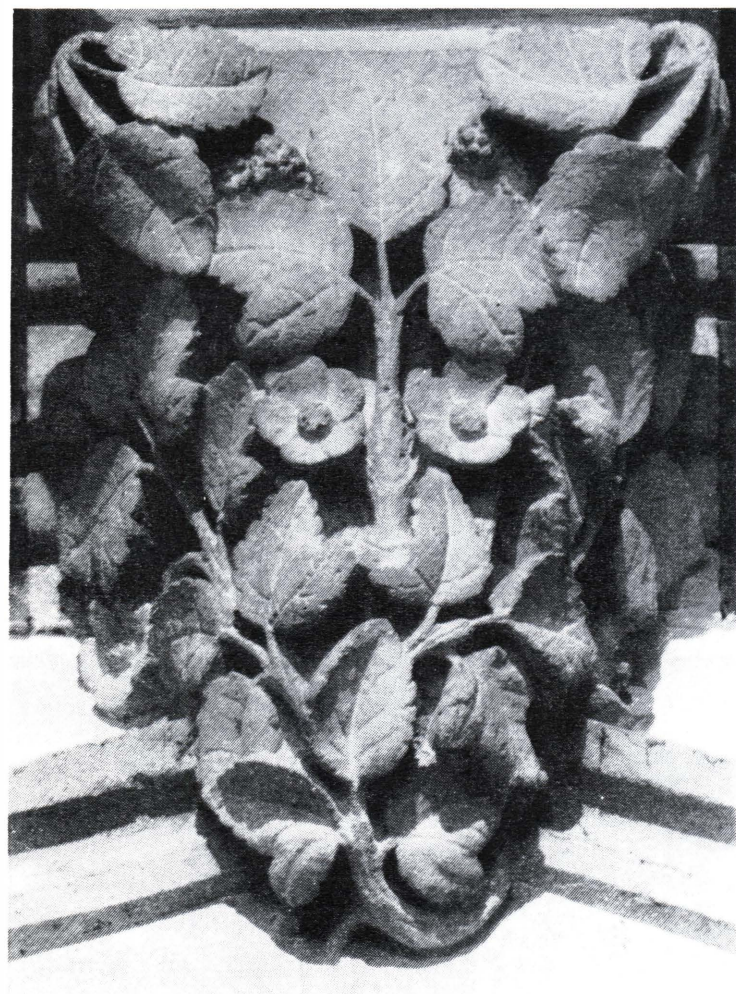
*Left:*

**Mid-sixteenth century chancel screen, Marwood, Devon.**

This section is all that remains of an elaborate screen donated by Sir John Beaupul, who was rector here in 1520. Alas, a later rector wantonly destroyed the rest. This single Renaissance masterpiece displays several variations on the theme, including leaf masks, foliage from the mouth and strings of beads. There are more leaf mask panels on the screen at Ugborough, Devon, with traces of the original paint. Imagine what a dazzling blaze of colour our churches must have been, an overwhelming spectacle to folk accustomed to drab simplicity at home.











*Above:*

**Stained glass window, St Bartholomew's, Brightwell Baldwin, Oxfordshire.**

Such a dynamic, lively head! This is but a fragment of a now-lost complete scene. Too long to be a tongue, surely these are flowers from the dog's mouth? Pieces of earlier glass, presumably salvaged from elsewhere in the church, have been re-used at random to frame the arms of a seventeenth century rector and bishop of Oxford, Richard Corbett. There are few surviving examples of Green Men in glass. St Mary Redcliffe, Bristol and Nantwich, Cheshire are other notable examples.

*Top right:*

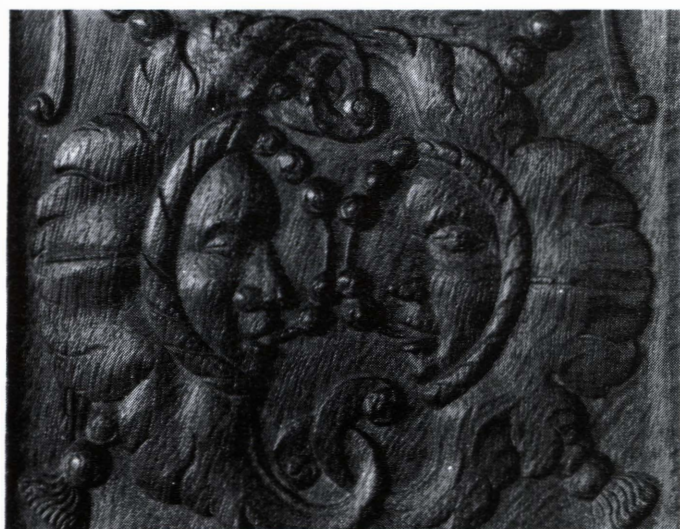
**Twelfth century capital fragment from Hyde Abbey cloisters, now on display in St Bartholomew's church, Winchester.**

Members of the Saxon royal family were interred here. A Benedictine nunnery moved to Hyde from its original site next the present cathedral, but destroyed 40 years later in a disastrous fire which ravaged the city in 1141. This is one of several remarkable capitals which may have survived the blaze, to be incorporated in the rebuilding of 1182. Note the curious balls gripped between their teeth. Carved on another of the capitals here is an inverted 'green cat'.

*Bottom right:*

**Seventeenth century font cover, St James the Apostle, Swimbridge, Devon.**

At first glance looking like another pulpit, the Renaissance canopy and cover rests on elaborate panels which completely enclose the font. The human flowers are perfectly delightful, an idea repeated on bench ends elsewhere in the West Country. Similar 'strings of beads' trail from the mouths of faces on the screen at Marwood, Devon and on a bench end at Spaxton, Somerset. How charming is the rector's suggestion that they could be 'bubbles' indicating speech or song!



## Acknowledgements

I am most grateful to local historians and all the clergy for their permission to reproduce my photographs and for their kindness in taking so much trouble on my behalf to provide historical details. Many thanks to Peter Poyntz-Wright, the expert on Somerset bench ends, who launched me on the Green Man trail and shared his knowledge of viticulture. A big thank you to Kathleen Basford, whose original book prompted the current surge of interest in the subject. Her continuing support and encouragement is my inspiration. Indeed, how thankful I am to all friends and fellow hunters who share the fun and join me on the search! Last but not least, he who drives me the length and breadth of the country, James, my patient, long-suffering husband, we understand the infinite diversity of expression within the broad label 'Green Man'!



# The Facts & Fancies of the Foliate Face

The reprinting of Kathleen Basford's *The Green Man* this September is a notable landmark. Since its original publication back in 1978 this book has become increasingly scarce but, nevertheless, resulted in a widespread interest in the Green Man among artists, folklorists, various types of 'church crawlers' and who knows who else. While many people now contribute to this ever-increasing interest in leaf-entwined faces, back in 1978 this motif was all-but unknown. Directly or otherwise, Kathleen Basford's book was the catalyst for this reawakening.

The term 'Green Man' to describe carvings of foliate faces found in medieval churches (and, later, secular buildings) is attributed to an article in *Folklore* by Lady Raglan, published in 1939. She notes the 'extraordinary number of "Green Man" inns all over the country'. While this provides clear evidence that the term 'Green Man' dates back to at least the Victorian era, the inn signs probably invoke the human figures decked in foliage, otherwise known as Jack-in-the-Green, which featured in Mayday processions of the time. There is no known link between inn signs and church carvings.

Lady Raglan's work remained little-known. The better-known books of the time on church carvings (principally M.D. Anderson's works [1]) did not mention foliate faces and emphasised curious animals and more-obviously Biblical motifs. R.O.M. and H.M. Carter contributed to *Folklore* in 1967

[2], noting that the foliate head was being given 'surprisingly little attention' but did not add significantly to the published information.

After nearly another decade, a book did appear which drew attention to medieval carvings - Ronald Sheridan and Anne Ross's *Grotesques and Gargoyles - Paganism in the Medieval Church* (David and Charles 1975). Green men took their place alongside a whole gamut of fantasy figures and monsters. As the subtitle suggests, the text sought to show parallels between the iconography and a variety of prechristian symbols.

Quite independently, Kathleen Basford, then a botanist and geneticist at Manchester University, encountered the famous Green Man at Fountains Abbey in 1964. The intimate association of plant life and the human form 'encapsulated a fact of life that I knew to be true. But the late fifteenth century craftsman who made the carving of the tragic Green Man at Fountains Abbey would not have had any thoughts of evolutionary biology or symbiosis in his mind. Nor, I felt sure, was he thinking of Jack-in-the-Green. So what was he thinking about? This was the question I wanted to ask of each and every long-dead craftsman!'

Four years later Mrs Basford had saved up enough money to buy the necessary photographic equipment to begin her twelve years of research into the history of Green Men. Together with her husband, she went 'head hunting' through Britain

## A rambling review of:

Kathleen Basford  
*The Green Man*

(Boydell and Brewer 1978; reissued 1996) 276 x 219 mm, 128 pages, 1 colour illustration, 95 black and white photographs, hardback £35

Peter Hill  
*In Search of the Green Man in Northamptonshire*

(Orman Publishing 1996) 257 x 182 mm, 72 pages, approx. 40 photographs and line drawings, perfect bound, £6.50

and Europe until a serious leg injury curtailed her travelling. In 1973 she gave a paper to a Folklore Society conference, under the title 'Quest for the Green Man' [3]. She provides a concise and evocative description of the motif:

'Many of these carvings are sinister. Some of them are powerful fantasies of the eerie and macabre. There are but few benevolent, smiling faces; occasionally they smile, but equivocally, like mischievous, even malicious imps. The expressions are, more typically, sad or grim. The forehead is contracted in a frown and the eyes glare. Sometime the eyes are squinting, suggesting various levels of inebriation, bellicose, morose, even comatose but seldom jocose. Sometimes the faces are partially or almost wholly hidden behind leaves, secret faces, peering through gaps in the foliage.'

Kathleen Basford's research showed that leaf masks originated in Roman art during the second half of the first century AD but only developed in the second century, being used on temples dedicated to many different deities and also on sarcophagi. In many ways the (male) leaf mask was used in the same way as the (female) medusa mask. There is even an example of a second century



The Green Man at Fountains Abbey.  
Woodcut by Guy Raglan Phillips.

leaf mask at Al Hadr, Iraq, which has snakes in his hair.

A second century capital from a Hadrianic temple in France, with just such a 'leaf mask', was incorporated, along with other reused Roman masonry, in the sixth century cathedral built by Bishop Nicetius at Trier. This building was an early example of 'Romanesque' architecture (popularly-known in Britain as the 'Norman' style). Trier was influential for church builders over many years. The happy accident of incorporating the

Roman leaf mask seems to have led to the foliate face gaining in popularity over succeeding centuries as the Romanesque style spread throughout western Europe.

The Green Man outlived the Romanesque and reached his medieval heyday during the Gothic. But, by then, the Trier capital was no longer visible. The imminent collapse of the roof led to the construction of a strengthening wall in the eleventh century. This blocked out the Roman capitals. Only in

the last hundred years were the capitals recognised; in very recent years a small window has been inserted to allow glimpses of the Green Man capital.

Kathleen Basford, in her own words, is 'a hard-bitten scientist'. She approached her research of the Green Man with appropriate rigour. This careful study, illustrated with the author's stunning photographs, was published by D.S. Brewer in 1978 as *The Green Man*. It showed how the foliate head had become one of the common decorative motifs in Christian churches. However, the author did not feel able to explain why the motif persisted for so long in that unlikely context, nor why it became so popular in the medieval era. In a recent letter, Mrs Basford wrote 'I agree absolutely with Professor Hutton when he writes [in *The Stations of the Sun* (Oxford UP 1996)] "The carved faces, still popularly known by Lady Raglan's nickname, remain enigmatic".'

## From fact to fancy

If the text of *The Green Man* was solidly factual, the large-format photographs were inspirational and provided a source book for multitudes of artists. Inevitably, perhaps, such potent images became romanticised. One of the researchers who had helped Kathleen Basford was Fritz Saxl. Mrs Basford quoted a prophetic remark of his in her original *Folklore* paper:

'images with a meaning peculiar to their own time and place, once created, have a magnetic power to attract other ideas into their sphere . . .' [4]

This process started almost immediately. *The Green Man* was 'reviewed' for *Folklore* by Ellen Ettlinger [5] - although she makes only a brief attempt to summarise or assess the book and principally details why she considers that several of these carvings can be considered to be accurate 'portraits' of people suffering from such afflictions as thyroid malfunctions, buphthalmus, incomplete fusions



# The Green Man

KATHLEEN BASFORD

'The rarest, most recondite and fascinating art book, which is a folklore and magic book as well... it is an incredibly thorough study, with every example illustrated, of the weird foliate heads or masks found in the medieval churches and cathedrals of Western Europe, with leaves sprouting from them.' THE TIMES  
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of the mandibular arch or even a supposed medieval treatment for rabies. Following this curious (but probably valid) interjection, interest in the Green Man was to quickly evolve in even more speculative directions.

The main emphasis of Lady Raglan's pioneering article had been to link the church carvings with the 'Green George' and Jack-in-the-Green figures of Mayday processions. The steadfast research of Roy Judge, published as *The Jack-in-the-Green* in 1979, destroyed any such suggestions. Indeed, Judge showed that the Jack-in-the-Green figures were closely associated with the street processions of chimney sweeps - and, thus, did not date back before the widespread use of chimneys in the late eighteenth century.

Nevertheless, perhaps drawing on Sheridan and Ross's speculations, the 1980s saw a rapid 'paganisation' of the foliate face. Popular literature, especially that written more-or-less directly for those associated with the revival of paganism, seized upon the Green Man as a 'pagan deity', a vegetation god, who had been secretly incorporated into the medieval churches to make the followers of the 'Old Ways' feel welcome. Attractive as this idea might be, it has failed to find any factual basis.

Passing over the more-or-less pagan associations, the Green Man has become something of an icon for environmentalists. This popular perception of the foliate face led to such attractive and inspirational books as William Anderson's *Green Man - the*

*archetype of our oneness with the Earth* (Harper Collins 1990), illustrated by Clive Hicks' photographs. Whereas Basford regarded the malevolent foliate faces as images of death and ruin, Anderson sees a Frazerian 'spirit of vegetation' symbolising life and renewal. Any historical basis is entirely lacking but this alluring archetype has become deeply rooted in modern minds.

## The Green Man in Northamptonshire

As noted, the Green Man was a popular motif in the Romanesque, and went on to much greater renown in the Gothic. Unfortunately the wealth of medieval art in the country's churches is all but ignored and only a small number of regional studies have been attempted [6]. The effort needed to survey all the churches in even a single county is daunting - from my own far-from-complete endeavours in Leicestershire and Rutland I am well aware just how much time is needed. In passing, I am well aware of various stalwarts who have researched holy wells in their locality; the relevant literature has steadily built up in the last ten years or so. The effort required to survey medieval churches is of a similar order to investigating holy wells but there seem to be few people interested in taking up the challenge.

My heartfelt congratulations then to Peter Hill for taking nearly thirty years to get to grips with the richness of medieval sculpture in Northamptonshire. The fruits of this toil have just appeared in his book, *In Search of the Green Man in Northamptonshire*. Northamptonshire is particularly rich in Green Man carvings, yet they have never been previously documented. The local building stones - such as those from Weldon and Barnack - are especially suited to detailed carvings. The county was prosperous in medieval times and the combination of suitable stone and affluent patrons resulted in a rich array of fine carvings. Peter Hill estimates that there are about 220 Green Men in Northamptonshire. No less than 87 churches in this county have examples - some quite splendid, as the illustrations attempt to show. This is a most useful guide and has already proved to be deservedly popular.

Hill's approach to the carvings is informative yet quite accessible. He acknowledges that the image of the Green Man is a powerful one, but one that has a changing message and so easily misinterpreted. In his introduction he cautions readers that 'we must be careful how we interpret facts or images, and what we link with them - not what we want them to be, for the sake of convenience or idealism!' Quite correctly, attention is drawn to the recent paganisation of the Green Man. However, I feel that he has rather ignored his own words of caution and over-emphasised the modern-day perceptions while leaving almost unstated the entirely different associations which would have been in the mind of the medieval carvers.

*In Search of the Green Man in Northamptonshire* is available from the publishers for £6.50:

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## The Green Man

Given the high level of interest in the Green Man, Kathleen Basford's book was unjustly difficult to obtain - even library loan copies were difficult.

Given that so much has changed since the late 70s, many might be surprised that the publishers should be reissuing *The Green Man* without any significant revisions. As I hope this article has justified, I happily agree with the author and publishers that this pioneering work is not in need of rewriting - a most remarkable commendation for the original research.

Less commendable is the cover price which puts the book out of range for most individuals, who will still find themselves resorting to library copies.

Finishing on a positive note, the author's royalties from the reprint will be donated to Common Ground.

## Acknowledgements

Special thanks to Kathleen Basford for her delightful letters in recent months; a number of quotations in this article are taken from her correspondence. Thanks also to Chris Fletcher for drawing my attention to the use of the Green Man as an inn sign since the mid-1850s.

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# STONEHENGE

## the grey men of the government resurrect the rejected Grey Route

The following messages appeared on the BritArch e-mail list on 23rd August.

**From Dr Michael Heyworth, Council for British Archaeology**

It is reported in 'The Guardian' today that the Government are about to announce that the proposal for a long tunnel to take the A303 under the area of the monument and leave the landscape free of modern intrusions has been rejected as too expensive. Instead, it is suggested, the

'Grey Route' is likely to be chosen - supposedly the cheapest option. This runs south of the stones through virgin countryside of prime archaeological and landscape value.

In response the CBA has issued the following statement:

STONEHENGE:  
A CBA STATEMENT  
16 August 1996

The Council for British Archaeology, an independent body with a membership that includes over 400 local, regional

and national archaeological bodies, reacts with astonishment to a report that the Government is about to announce that it will reconsider the construction of a new length of the A303 trunk road within the Stonehenge World Heritage Site [1] along a route which Ministers rejected in 1994.

The so-called Grey Route would carve through an area rich in archaeological evidence to the south of Stonehenge. First mooted in 1993, it has been opposed by English Heritage, the Government's statutory



advisers on archaeology, and was dismissed by a Planning Conference which the Highways Agency itself convened in 1995 [2].

CBA President Dr Philip Dixon said: 'I hope this report is wrong, since if true it would be a deplorable betrayal of commitments which the Government has made to the rest of the world, and of principles of sustainable conservation which it urges on everyone else.' [3]

The CBA points out that interpretational facilities at Stonehenge - described as a 'national disgrace' by the House of Commons National Heritage Committee - and the present trunk road are both of recent construction, yet already regretted. Dr Dixon continued:

'The last generation built the A303, which is a scar on the Stonehenge landscape. If the present generation slashes another scar across the area no lesson will have been learned. We should be thinking long-term, and apportioning costs accordingly. If we are to be told that burial of the A303 in a tunnel beneath the World Heritage Site is unaffordable, we shall be requesting exact details of the cost-benefit equation that is being used. If the Government can find this sort of money for roughly the same length of urban mororway, it is difficult to understand why the stewardship, for posterity, of a cultural asset unique in the world should matter less.'

The CBA supports English Heritage/National Trust proposals for the closure

and grassing over of nearby roads and the reunification of the landscape surrounding Stonehenge, but believes that these are being thwarted by the uncoordinated pursuit of different aims by the Ministry of Defence, the Highways Agency, and the Department of National Heritage.

Dr Dixon added:

'We admire the efforts which have been made by Sir Jocelyn Stevens to achieve an integrated solution. His vision has been

frustrated by fragmented interests which are mutually cancelling. Its realisation requires an initiative from the highest level - like Downing Street - which declares the long-term safeguarding of Stonehenge and its surroundings to be the Government's overriding priority.'

#### Notes

1: The 1972 UNESCO World Heritage Convention declares parts of the cultural heritage to be of 'outstanding interest' and thus deserving of conservation as 'part of the world heritage of mankind as a whole'. In 1987 Stonehenge and its associated landscape - rich in archaeology spanning c. 5000 years - was inscribed on the World Heritage list. States Party to the Convention have undertaken 'to take the appropriate legal, scientific, technical administrative and financial measures necessary for the identification, protection, conservation, presentation and rehabilitation' of World Heritage sites.

2: Any revival of the Grey Route would be the more astonishing following the resolutions of the Planning Conference, organised in 1995 by the Highways Agency, attended by local authorities, residents, landowners, the CBA, English Heritage and the National Trust, under the chairmanship of Sir Robin Wilson. The Conference supported 'in principle the proposal by English Heritage and the National Trust for a long tunnel under Stonehenge', and did not support the southern Grey Route 'which passes through the southern limits of the Stonehenge Bowl and affects inalienable land held by the National Trust'.

3: Para 2.22 of 'Planning and the Historic Environment' (PPG 15, issued by DoE and DNH) states that inclusion of a site on the World Heritage List highlights 'the outstanding international importance of the site' and urges local authorities to formulate policies for protecting these sites which

reflect the fact that they have all 'been designated for their outstanding universal value'. At present there are ten World Heritage Sites in England.

**The following was e-mailed to the National Trust and English Heritage by Kathleen Camplin and forwarded to the BritArch e-mail list on 23rd August:**

Living in Los Angeles, I have been experiencing Theme Parks all of my life.

With this in mind, I would like to make a few suggestions for the proposed Stonehenge Theme Park which might boost attendance:

1) All hosts, guides and information desk employees must wear Druid white mantles.

2) A character must be created to play mascot to the monument. Something like 'Danny the Druid' and 'Dana the Druid' might be made into an oversized costumed host to greet visitors as they enter the park and be available for photographs with the guests. This would also lend itself to the making of stuffed versions which could be purchased in the gift shop.

3) Musical productions with Danny and Dana could be performed during the summer months.

4) Since no one will be admitted to the actual monument, Virtual Stonehenge must include the proper Druid rituals on the appropriate holy days.

5) The gift shop must include miniature monuments in all of the following materials, priced accordingly: gold, silver, pewter, stone and wax. Instructions should be included with each to allow the visitor the ability to use them as calendars once they return home. They must all be available with crystals representing the positions of the planets at the holy days of each particular year.

6) As the Druids did not communicate in writing, there must not be any signs giving



visitors directions to either the Visitor Center, Monorail Station or any other section of the park.

7) Mistletoe must be available year round.

I sincerely hope that the above is of some assistance to your park planning.

**Andrew Selkirk, editor of *Current Archaeology*, e-mailed the BritArch list with the following response:**

A splendid suggestion! Can I nominate Jocelyn Stevens to play the part of Danny the Druid? With a stuffed version available for sale in the gift shop?

**A wonderful webpage for the Stonehenge controversy has been created at:**  
<http://www.mistral.co.uk/hammerwood/stonheng.htm>

## Clare Prout

# Save Our Sacred Sites

## Flag Fen out of the mire ?

Readers of the last issue of *At the Edge* will recall the appeal for substantial funds to keep the Flag Fen excavations 'alive'.

Information received in September, just before this issue went to press, indicates that sufficient funds have been received or promised to keep the site open for the immediate future.

All readers who can make an outing to Peterborough are recommended to visit and see for themselves the latest developments and interpretations of this major bronze age 'ritual' site.

Back in October '95 a Wiltshire local paper printed a story about the National Trust (NT) employing security guards to ensure that visitors to West Kennet long barrow behaved 'properly'. This was necessary, we were told, because of increasing damage to the barrow. West Kennet long barrow is a favourite monument of mine and I was alarmed at the thought that security guards, too often uniformed thugs, would be able to turf me out of the barrow if they did not like the look of me, and that the ultimate in 'management' of such sites seems to be to put a fence around them and prevent people from wondering at the beauty and awesome engineering skills involved.

So I took a trip to the barrow to see the damage for myself. I left feeling that the best course of management would be to put an electric fence and a pack of Dobermans around it.

The interior of the barrow, one of the world's oldest monuments and part of a World Heritage Site, is scorched and flaking. Greasy black grime from candle flame runs the

height of the stones which were also covered in chalk symbols, and fruit decomposed, noisy with flies, at the back of the central chamber. The exterior bore witness to several fires, while beer cans and smokers detritus littered the site.

I am a Pagan. That is, I try to honour the Land, perceiving it as a sacred and sentient creature, and I, along with an estimated 100,000 others, will make a pilgrimage to a sacred site, places like West Kennet, during one of paganism's eight major festivals.

It seems that we, along with many other visitors, need to learn new and less damaging ways of living with these delicate and vulnerable sites.

At the same time, the managers of sites, often English Heritage or the National Trust, have got to come to terms with the fact that a large and growing percentage of the population view ancient monuments as places of worship, with good archaeological evidence to back us up.

It is too easy to produce a whining, emotive little newsletter pandering to the 'It is



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My Right' brigade, but having seen the damage done by my own people (if the symbolism was anything to go by) and having spoken with Chris Gingell, the NT manager of the Avebury complex of which the barrow is part, it seemed that the time was right to begin an organisation that could be a forum for tourist organisations, land managers, Pagans and other spiritually-motivated visitors, parish and local councils and so on, to discuss the future.

The aims of Save Our Sacred Sites are:

- To preserve and protect our monuments for perpetuity.
- To provide information on the practical limitations of using sacred sites.
- To provide information about the ongoing spiritual and

archaeological importance of sacred sites.

- To discover practical and acceptable ways in which to minimise disturbance and damage to sacred sites to preserve free access to all sacred sites.

So far the response to SOS has been positive, with historians, archaeologists, conservationists as well as Pagans and the National Trust being interested enough to contribute and subscribe to the journal, *Walking the Talk* (which means behaving in a way that reflects one's personal ideals).

Almost inevitably, however, non-spiritual interest is wavering. It seems that most non-spiritual academics, land managers and locals still dismiss the idea that these sites could

have any modern spiritual meaning, despite their ritualistic archaeological foundation. Frankly, they will have to believe it as numbers of spiritual visitors increase.

However, rather than denounce councils who condemn people camping near to sacred sites but refuse to sanction a campsite, or vilify organisations whose idea of 'conservation' means impregnable asepsis, or yell at people who believe that an open fire and a Tesco pomegranate are valuable additions to a sacred site, SOS wants to motivate these people by recognising the work of more enlightened people.

This would be easier if they existed in greater numbers, of course, or made themselves known, but there are new and exciting ways of minimising damage to sites while continuing their use.

SOS has asked the National Trust to consider the reintroduction of Guardians, people who have a religious responsibility to clear up the sites and report any damage; the possibility of creating a new sacred site close to the Avebury complex to give a new focus for spirituality whilst relieving some of the pressure from older sites; the creation of signs which might read:

'This is an ancient sacred site. Please treat it with care and respect by: Not lighting any fires, not using candles near the stones (tree, etc), removing all litter, respecting the rights of other visitors. Thank you.'

It is a huge step for the National Trust, but they have always been open to new ideas, and SOS has offered to help raise part of the funds required.

The time is ripe to consider new ways of living with ancient monuments. They were created to satisfy some emotional or cultural need and the communities that created them were intelligent, resourceful and able to move beyond the known. 4,000 years on, SOS believes that we can do the same today.



# ROCK ART CONFERENCE

## Durham University 9th June 1996

Organised by the arts, libraries and museums departments of Durham County Council in association with the exhibition: Northern rock art: Prehistoric carvings and contemporary artists, Durham Art Gallery 27 July to 1 September 1996

Speakers at the conference included:

### The nature of prehistoric rock art from Northumberland to Spain

**Professor Richard Bradley**  
Reading University

Rather than speculate on the meaning of rock art symbols, Bradley's work has focused on the topographical aspect of rock art. This approach has obviously proved productive as examples from northern Spain, the west coast of Sweden, and northern Britain have shown similar patterns in the locations chosen for rock art.

Bradley's work in Spain showed how the rock art tends to follow the edges of narrow sheltered valleys, with the most complex carvings occurring where the valleys open out to form basin like areas which hold moisture even in times of drought. These areas seem to have been the intended focus of the most complex carvings as they are situated so as to view the precise area of these fertile 'basins'.

In the Swedish examples the rock art occurs in a kind of rocky buffer zone overlooking the fertile lowlands and separating this area from the higher burial grounds. It was suggested that the boat images

that occur in the rock art in these 'liminal zones' may represent the sea and a symbolic crossing to the isle of the dead.

In Scotland, the rock art in the Kilmartin valley area also follows the lower slopes of valleys, with the most complex carvings sited where valleys meet and overlook fertile areas. Being located along the routes into the settled areas they were positioned to be seen to all. As time passed the carvings were being appropriated by individuals to be used in burial structures, this marked a change from a communal to a more personal use for the rock art. This also marked the end of the rock art tradition in general.

### Rock art in the landscape

**Professor Robert Layton**  
Durham University

Professor Layton gave an interesting presentation covering three specific areas of rock art, his own study of Australian aboriginal art, the Bush man rock art of Africa and the paleolithic cave art in France. The three styles were discussed in detail along with interpretations of the symbols and images used. He was cautious when it came to speculation on the meaning of abstract symbols in Britain's rock art, noting that even with the paleolithic cave art which features identifiable images, opinions vary widely as to its

meaning and purpose. He covered the currently 'popular' theory concerning trance induced entopic images and rock art, commenting on the general lack of these type of symbols in paleolithic cave art.

### Local symbols on stones

**Stan Beckensall**

Stan Beckensall's presentation treated the audience to a visual feast of rock art from northern Britain, illustrating the whole range from simple cup markings to the more complex designs involving multiple concentric circles, spirals and rosettes, etc. He stressed the need for accurate recording of motifs and described the techniques he has developed during the 20 years he has been actively studying them. His perseverance and attention to detail has been rewarded many times by finding 'new' motifs even at previously recorded sites.

Having been somewhat of a lone voice for many years on the subject of Britain's rock art, Beckensall expressed his satisfaction that at last it appears to be receiving the attention it deserves. Finally, he urged people not to overlook the beauty and simplicity of the art, much of which has been executed by skilled artists with an eye for composition, fluidity, and connection within the designs.

## Emblems of eternity: The history and future of British prehistoric rock art

**Paul Frodsham**

Northumberland National  
Park archaeologist

Paul Frodsham started by describing the work of early nineteenth century investigators' attempts to date British rock art and also their speculations as to its origin and meaning. Leading on from this he covered the important contributions to the subject by people such as Ronald Morris and Stan Beckensall, pausing to mention some of the 104 theories for the purpose of rock art, collected by Morris. These range from the plausible to the bizarre e.g. un-deciphered messages from space!

He then related some of his recent work on the spiral motif in Britain, this is quite a rare motif and interestingly tends to occur mainly on red sandstone, a fine example being 'Long Meg' the large standing stone by the stone circle near Penrith. He also reported that a faint spiral motif has recently been recorded on one of the boulders in the Castlerigg stone circle, which had gone unnoticed up until this time. Next, Frodsham described the purpose of the spiral motif in the rock art of other cultures. The Amerindian Zuni people say their rock art designs are messages from their ancestors, the spiral motif representing the journey to the centre place, the creation time, and also the yearly path of the sun.

Finally, he came to the subject of the future of Britain's rock art (possibly the most important topic in the whole conference). He noted that in

Sweden the major rock art sites are protected within national parks, in northern Spain the art has become a symbol of national identity, while here in Britain it goes largely unnoticed, official bodies are unsure what to do with it and so have taken the easy option - do nothing! This deplorable state means little research is done on Britain's rock art, even less on how to preserve it.

Frodsham proposed that a group be formed from those active in the study of prehistoric rock art, to act as an identifiable body able to advise, co-ordinate and raise awareness on all aspects relating to Britain's rock art and its future preservation. This proposal was unanimously welcomed by the audience and is currently being investigated. Hopefully the importance of British rock art will now be recognised and it will receive the attention it deserves.

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## Unique British anthropomorphic rock carving

Paul Bennett and Graeme Chappell have surveyed large parts of West and North Yorkshire looking for prehistoric 'cup and ring' marked rocks. They have found many examples 'overlooked' by other researchers. Perhaps their most notable find to date came on a day when the temperatures never went above freezing (are they dedicated or just obsessed?). They were on Askwith Moor and encountered this simple human figure with a 'head-dress' or 'halo'. The rock also has simple cup marks, and nearby rocks also have carvings of similar style.

To the best of everyone's knowledge, this is a unique image as British prehistoric rock art normally comprises of 'abstract' cup and ring marks. It could be the oldest depiction of a human being in Britain.

Bob Trubshaw



The Askwith Moor rock art with the 'human figure' and other cup marks 'highlighted' with chalk. Based on a photograph by Graeme Chappell with the contrast enhanced by computer.





From Michael Howard:

## The Unbroken Tradition

Many thanks for *At the Edge* No.3, which was full of meaty and provocative material as usual. I noted your review of *Twilight of the Celtic Gods* by David Clarke and Andy Roberts, and your comments on pages 26 and 43 regarding my own (alleged) researches into an 'unbroken tradition of organised witchcraft in Britain' (sic). In all fairness, I don't think I have ever claimed that there existed an unbroken tradition of organised witchcraft in Britain', although this claim has been made by others.

What limited research I have carried out has been to try and determine if witchcraft (organised or otherwise) existed pre-1940 and, if so, did it have any links with modern Wicca and the neo-pagan revival. As a result I am convinced that a form of rural witchcraft (mostly composed of solitary practitioners of folk magic) existed in the post-Enlightenment period. What is lacking at present, among a wealth of claims and counter-claims, is any solid documentary evidence linking these practitioners and modern Wicca. There is however some evidence of several witchcraft revivals since the early 1800s. Therefore if any 'organised witchcraft' is uncovered it may date from only the last two hundred years.

To use a topical example: Clarke and Roberts in their book say in respect of Alderley Edge in Cheshire 'Prior to these overblown and sensationalized events, there was actually no "ancient" tradition of witchcraft associated with Alderley Edge' (p32). The 'events' they refer to are the publicity seeking antics of Alex Sanders at the Edge in 1962.

This statement by Clarke and Roberts contradicts information I have received from somebody who claims to have been a member of a coven which met at Alderley Edge during the last war. While not 'ancient', this group I believe may date back to the last century. Interestingly, this coven had no connection with Gerald Gardner, although it did have contacts with other covens in the North Wales area. I have no reason to believe that my informant is either a liar or a fantasist. Therefore it seems witchcraft was practised independently at Alderley Edge before the modern revival, but it probably represents a tradition which is less than two hundred years old.

Critics of the existence of witchcraft before Gardner tend to use the phrase 'unbroken tradition', sometimes suffixed by the words 'dating back to the Stone Age', when seeking to ridicule any attempt to link modern witchcraft to past activities and beliefs, or place it in a historical perspective. This is a simplistic reaction to what is a very complex subject, and it misrepresents the agenda of 'sceptical researchers' like myself.

While I try to keep an open mind about claims made about the supposed antiquity of modern witchcraft traditions, I have always been a vociferous critic of those who claim to belong to 'hereditary families' following 'pagan' beliefs and practices going back centuries without offering evidence to back them up. Using that criteria, many of the claims made in *Twilight of the Celtic Gods*, for instance, need to be

treated with some caution.

[Sincere apologies to Mike Howard for my mistake, and many thanks for this informative response. R.N.T.]

From Alby Stone:

## On shamans and Tocharians

It was gratifying to see my recent *Talking Stick* article 'In search of the Indo-European shaman' mentioned in the pages of *At the Edge*. The origins of the word *shaman* and the extent to which shamanism was practised among the ancient Indo-Europeans are indeed worthy of more intense scrutiny and careful consideration than has hitherto been the case. However, I fear that the editor has been a little over-generous in his assessment of the article. Far from being innovative, my etymological assessment was based on linguistic and historical work done long ago - all I really did was collate old arguments and reappraise them in the light of more recent ethnological and archaeological research, which was to have formed the basis of a 'part 2' follow-up article, now abandoned in favour of a more detailed and wide-ranging study that presently forms part of my personal work-in-progress.

Also in the 'Abstracts' section of *At the Edge* No.3: the Tarim Basin mummies reported by Quentin Letts in *The Times* of 10th May 1996 have been associated with the Indo-European 'Tocharian' languages once spoken in the region. The Tocharians may be identical with the Guti and Tukri peoples known to the ancient Iranians and Babylonians. A series of articles dealing with the Tarim Basin mummies and Tocharians appeared in the *Journal of Indo-European Studies* Vol.23 No.s 4&5 (Fall/Winter 1995).

From Andy Norfolk:

## Pioneering hobby horses

Bob Trubshaw's article, 'Paganism in British folk customs' (*At the Edge* No.3), cites E.C. Cawte's research which concludes that before the late sixteenth century hobby horses only appeared in pageants, not with morris teams. The Cornish miracle play *Beunans Meriasek* ('The Life of Meriasek') was completed in 1504 by Radolphus Ton, probably a graduate of Glasney College and a priest at Camborne. It includes what is probably the earliest mention of a hobby horses:

Teudarus: *Yu hemma oll an  
confort  
a'm bedha dywourthouth-why?  
Ay, Serys, yma dheugh sport  
pan us dughan dhymmo-vy  
Wel, wel, nafs!*  
*Re Appolyn, ow dew splan,  
kens dyberth, ny wharth ma's  
ran:  
me a be dhe'n Hobyhors  
ha'y gowetha!*

In Dr Whitley Stokes' translation:

Teudar: *is this all the  
consolation  
I am to have from you?  
Eh, Sirs, you have sport  
when I have grief.  
Well, well, no matter!  
By Apollo, my glorious god,  
before parting only some will  
laugh:  
I will pay out the Hobbyhorse  
and its pair!*

So here we have a single hobby horse giving some entertainment. Dr Stokes' translation of the word *gowetha* (it mutates to *gowetha* after the participle *y*) as a *pair*, in the singular, is perhaps misleading as it means a company or group of men. This certainly suggests to me a group of male dancers. If this is the case then a single hobby horse accompanied by

male dancers must have been known in Cornwall at the end of the fifteenth century. Baring Gould, writing in 1889, described the Padstow hobby horse party of that time as 'The Hobby Horse Pairs', which was a party of eight men.

The present mask of the Padstow 'Obby 'Oss only dates from about 1840. However, it does seem that the 'Oss always had some form of headgear. A drawing of 1835 shows a tall, pointed hat with a plume from which the present headgear has obviously developed. However, as Rev Richard Polwhele in his 1803 *History of Cornwall* describes the 'Obby 'Oss as 'a man drest up in a stallion horse's skin, led by crowds of men and women and at every dirty pool dipping the head in the pool and throwing the water upon them.' C.S. Gilbert, writing in 1817, describes a similar scene, but by 1824 the 'Oss is described by Hitchens and Drew as being constructed of canvas stretched on hoops; however the head is still dipped in water to drench the onlookers. It is not clear from these descriptions whether the 'Oss's headgear could be described as a hood.

Perhaps St Augustine had no sense of humour and had been given a soaking by a similar 'Oss in the fourth century, prompting him to preach 'if you ever hear of anyone carrying out that most filthy practice of dressing up like a horse or a stag, chastise him most severely.'

There were hobby horses in Cornwall, apparently known as *Penglas* or 'Grey head', one of which was described by R. Edmonds in 1862 as having a horse's head and neck made of wood with snapping jaws, while the horse was covered with coarse cloth or hide. Again it is not clear to me whether this constitutes a hooded animal of the Padstow type.

It seems to me that the indications from Cornwall cast some doubts on Cawte's assertions that it was only at the end of the sixteenth century that there is evidence of single

hobby horses with dancers and, more especially, that this type of construction was not called a hobby horse before the twentieth century.

For further information see Donald R. Rawe, *Padstow's Obby Oss* (1982; reprint 1993) and Craig Weatherhill, *Cornish Place-Names and Language* (1995).

From Ken Heselton:

## Mythical Pharaohs

I am a little puzzled by the reference to an Egyptian Pharaoh in Michael Behrend's article 'Oxhide Tales' in *At the Edge* No.2. He relates that a Muslim, Abu'l Haggag, took charge of the army of a Christian Pharaoh frequently defeated in battle. After proving victorious, the Muslim refused, *inter alia*, to marry the Pharaoh's daughter unless she became a Muslim. As a result the Pharaoh and his people were converted.

I have always believed that the true Pharaohs ceased with the end of the XXXth Dynasty in about 350 BC. They were followed by the Greek Ptolemaic Pharaohs and the titular Roman emperors, who were latterly Christian. I am unaware, however, of it being applied to the later Coptic rulers of Egypt.

Mahoment died in AD 632, although the *hegira* dates from 622. For Abu'l Haggag to be termed a Muslim, he must have lived after 622 or more probably 632. Three events related in the article would have to have taken place between either of these two dates and the Arab conquest of Egypt in 641. Perhaps Abu'l was very, very early Muslim and was part of the conquering Arab horde, through Michael Behrend's story implies that he was there before the invasion. It all seems very confusing. Perhaps Michael Behrend can elucidate? My present inclination is to threat the whole episode as a myth.



### Reply from Michael Behrend:

None of the oxtide tales in *At the Edge* No.2 was meant to be understood as historical fact. I am sorry if this was not made clear. The tales of Abu'l Haggag is an oral tradition from Luxor which was published in Georges Legrain's book *Louqsor sans les Pharons* (1914). Like many local traditions, it contains obvious anachronisms (cf. Lord Raglan's book *The Hero*, chapter 3).

I ought to have noticed that Legrain does include some historical account of Abu'l Haggag, based on Islamic historians. Apparently his real name was Mohammed Gamal Eddin, and he died as late as 1244; so he lived long after the pharaohs, and indeed after Geoffrey of Monmouth recorded (invented?) the similar tale of Hengist and Vortigern. He and his son and grandson are buried and venerated at Luxor. The local people (says Legrain) are not much interested in the writings of historians about him, but prefer the popular traditions, several of which are recorded in Legrain's book.

From Ben Chapman:

## Giants and midgets

I am researching into the lives and phenomena of peoples of excess and limited growth (giants and midgets) and would like to hear from anyone interested in this study with a view to exchanging information etc.

Please reply direct to:  
Mr C B Chapman  
10 Young Street  
WITHERNSEA  
East Yorkshire  
HU19 2DX



Compiled by Bob Trubshaw [RT] and Jeremy Harte [JH].

## Sacred groves

Natural wet areas - so-called 'carr' or 'wet woodlands' - in the prehistoric era have sometimes been subsequently inundated and survived as 'submerged forests'. Some, at least, are associated with neolithic and bronze age settlement nearby. Were the vast amounts of late prehistoric metalwork discovered in Ireland from watery contexts 'deliberately sacrificed in the liminal area between the settlement space and open water?' Could, indeed, timber henges be an attempt to recreate the conditions found in a wet woodland grove?

A. O'Sullivan, 'Exploring ancient woodlands', *Archaeology Ireland* Vol.10 No.2 Summer 1996 p14-15. [See also Colin Richards' suggestions on henges as 'watery places' reported in *At the Edge* No.2 p26. For the 'grandparent' of watery neolithic sacred sites, see Michael Dames *The Silbury Treasure* (T&H 1976).] [RT]

## Woods and mazes

In the subsequent issue of *Archaeology Ireland*, the 'otherness' and 'ambivalent meaning' of dense woodland is compared to medieval mazes as a way of inducing trance-like states - and may have been an intentional aspect of prehistoric timber circles.

Conor Newman, 'Woods, metamorphosis and mazes - the "otherness" of timber circles', *Archaeology Ireland* No.37 p34-37 [RT].

## Warriors, farmers or rituals?

Some fundamental rethinking of the British Iron Age is underway. The jury is still out but verdict is likely to be greater distinction from European 'Celts', with little emphasis on warfare (throw away all the school textbooks) but plenty of farmers - with plentiful evidence of mythology and taboos being incorporated into buildings and even the disposal of 'rubbish'.

J.D. Hill 'Weaving the strands of a new Iron Age' *British Archaeology* No.17 (September 1996) p8-9

## How old are standing stones?

Standing stones are usually regarded as bronze age, mostly because a few megaliths are apparently 'grave markers' for bronze age burials. But the stones fit better with neolithic contexts - were the bronze age burials simply placed in a location that was recognised as, in some way, sacred and ancient? A short article which deserves to be followed up with wide-ranging fieldwork by amateurs and academics!

G. Cooney, 'Standing stones - marking the neolithic landscape', *Archaeology Ireland* Vol.10 No.2 Summer 1996 p29-30. [RT]

## New Irish rock art

The excavations at Knockroe passage tomb (in Co. Kilkenny, away from the usual Boyne Valley sites), also known as 'The Caiseal', has revealed many orthostats with sophisticated decoration.

M. O'Sullivan, 'A platform to the past - Knockroe passage tomb', *Archaeology Ireland* Vol.10 No.2 Summer 1996 p11-13. [RT]

## ASCs in Irish tombs

The rock art in Irish passage tombs (such as Newgrange) has

already been shown to embody 'entoptic' motifs which suggest they were produced by people familiar with 'altered states of consciousness' [see 'Abstracts' in *At the Edge* No.1]. The same researcher adds more detail relating to the 'tunnel experience' (often associated in ASCs with access to the supernatural world) and visions of the dead. The article is followed by a number of comments by academics; the 'you're just a hippy' criticisms of prehistoric art authority, Paul Bahn, are countered with a ruthless vigour that leaves even the innocent reader rather punch drunk. Fascinating article and great defence!

J. Dronfield 'Entering alternative realities: cognition, art and architecture in Irish passage-tombs', *Cambridge Archaeological Journal* Vol.6 No.1 (1996) p37-72. [RT]

## ASCs in archaic Texas

The rock art of the Tex-Mex border contains human figures convincingly interpreted as shamans. Archaeological excavation of associated middens 4,000 to 6,000 years old reveals evidence for mescal, datura and peyote.

C.E. Boyd and J.P. Dering 'Medicinal and hallucinogenic plants identified in the sediments and pictographs of the Lower Pecos, Texas Archaic', *Antiquity* Vol.70 No.268 (1996) p256-75. [RT]

## Farming for ASCs

Evidence of henbane seeds in carbonised porridge found in Fife and in the pouch of a Viking lady buried at Fyrkat (Denmark) strongly suggests its psychoactive properties were known and used. To avoid walking miles for exciting species, perhaps even farming started with 'growing your own' rather than with carbohydrate-rich crops?

A. Sherratt 'Flying up with the souls of the dead', *British*

*Archaeology* No.15 June 1996 p14. [Those interested in a detailed discussion of henbane, and 'beers' made with other psychoactive plants, see the fascinating chapter by Christian Ratsch in Ralph Metzner's *The well of remembrance* (Shambhala 1994).] [RT]

## 'Neolithic masturbation?'

Please note, this is a quote, not your editor's lurid copywriting and relates to new interpretations of a male figure from Greece and a female figure from Malta [see illustration below]. Parallel evidence is in Ancient Egyptian creation myths and the end-perforated gold penis sheaths - clearly meant for display and 'the hole in the end would have been a let down to viewers if nothing had come out of it' [who needs lurid copywriting with quotes like these?]

Even the famous prehistoric 'Venus' figures may also 'have carried an erotic charge in a cold, Ice Age society where physical nudity must have been an uncommon sight'. Furthermore, so-called 'batons' or 'spear straighteners' decorated to resemble penises

(including a double-ended example) are common in the Upper Palaeolithic - and they all 'fall within the size range of dildoes'.

T. Taylor 'Uncovering the prehistory of sex', *British Archaeology* No.15 June 1996 p8-9; preview of forthcoming book *The Prehistory of Sex* (Fourth Estate, Sept 1996). [RT]

## Cerne Abbas to be dated

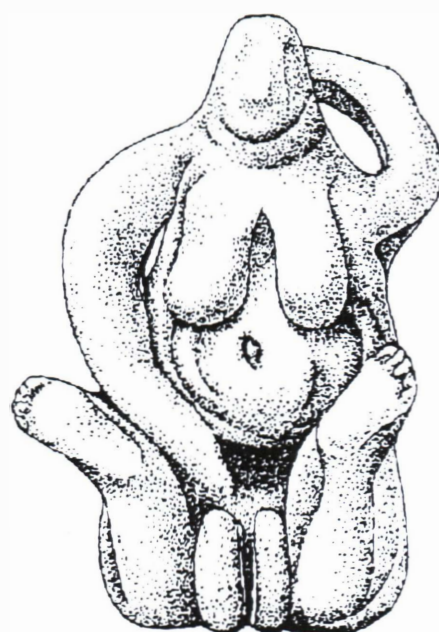
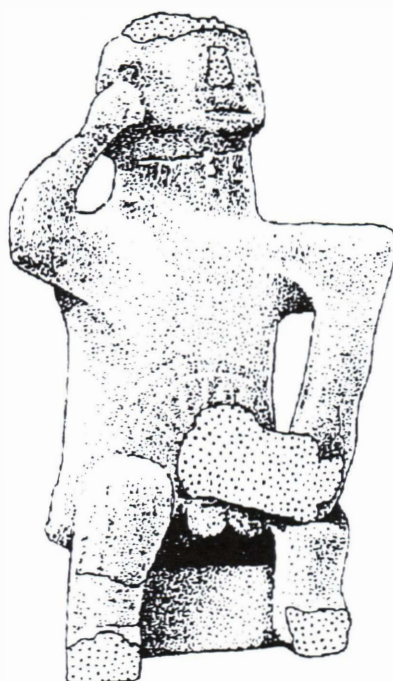
The famous Cerne Abbas Giant is of dubious antiquity (see Reviews section in this issue). Jeremy Harte makes his own assessment.

J. Harte 'The Cerne Giant: a long-standing mystery', *3rd Stone* No.24 (Summer/Autumn 1996) p5-9. [RT]

## Scottish rolling suns

The sight of the sun 'rolling' up or down the horizon at midsummer can be seen from about at least six Scottish sites, including stone circles such as Easter Aquorthies.

M.C. Youngblood 'Rolldowns and other solar phenomena', *Friends of Grampian Stones Newsletter* Laminas 1996. [RT]





## Cairn architecture

Professor Bradley's investigations into the Clava Cairns and his interpretation of their deliberate 'architectural' conception were briefly mentioned in *At the Edge* No.2 (p25-6). Further details of his ideas conclude that 'every structural device at Clava had a symbolic role'.

R. Bradley 'Excavations at Clava', *Current Archaeology* No.148 (July 1996) p136-142. [RT]

## Neolithic cosmological engineering

Dr Julian Thomas's paper, first read at the TLH Moot October 1995 and then at the 17th TAG Conference in December (see *At the Edge* No.2), also sees neolithic monuments as 'cosmological engineering' that 'transformed and combined the significances of substances which were representative of the landscape as a whole.'

J. Thomas 'Monuments ancient and modern', *The Ley Hunter* No.125 (1996) p17-19. [RT]

## Stonehenge bluestone

The long-running controversy over whether the Stonehenge bluestones are glacial erratics or transported from the Preseli mountains has placed much importance on a large bluestone boulder allegedly from Bole barrow, near Stonehenge. Now it seems likely that it was never at Bole barrow.

A. Selkirk 'Stonehenge bluestones' *Current Archaeology* No.148 (July 1996) p143-4. [RT]

## Lichen dating of labyrinths

Swedish labyrinths made of boulders have been dated to between AD 1500 and 1650 by

closely studying the growth rates of lichen.

Rabbe Sjöberg 'Lichenometric dating of boulder labyrinths on the Upper Norrland Coast, Sweden', *Caerdroia* No.27 (1996) p10-17. [RT]

## Troy towns

The prevalent term 'Troy town' for turf mazes presupposes that medieval English people were familiar with the Classical legends relating to the fall of Troy - there is good evidence to show they were.

Michael Behrend 'Julian and Troy names', *Caerdroia* No.27 (1996) p18-23. [RT]

## Mediterranean mazes

A comprehensive catalogue of ancient mazes and labyrinths from the countries bordering the Mediterranean includes 33 examples, many previously little-known.

Staffan Lundén 'The labyrinth in the Mediterranean', *Caerdroia* No.27 (1996) p28-54. [RT]

## Neolithic enclosure on Man

The first neolithic ditched enclosure on the Isle of Man is 'arguably the most significant archaeological discovery in the island's history'. Excavations this June near Castletown found a number of artifacts, including a complete ceremonial jar.

Bournemouth University press release disseminated on BritArch e-mail list 4th July 1996. [RT]

## Bronze age 'hieroglyphs'

Do the symbols on bronze age cremation pots encode information about the sex and life of the 'occupant'? Could breast-like protuberances suggest the deceased was

female; do dots suggest numbers of children; were the complex diagonal patterns akin to 'heraldic' kin-names? The pots are contemporary with Cretan Linear A and B scripts (although the symbols are quite different).

J. Leake and S. Howard 'Ancient pottery rewrites history' *Sunday Times* 16th June 1996 [Cutting kindly submitted by David Taylor.] [RT]

## A ley with it all

A ley in the heart of Alfred Watkins' country, connecting two prominent hills (Bredon and the so-called 'British Camp' on the Malverns), with solstice sunrise markers, legends of a medieval 'corpse way' and, just maybe, a couple of now-lost turf mazes. Too good to be true? Maybe not!

B. Hoggard 'Dead sunny', *The Ley Hunter* No.125 (1996) p14-16. [RT]

## Indian cosmological landscapes

Pilgrimages to the twelve most notable *lingams* of Shiva creates a nest of 'sacred circuits' in the landscape which embody key cosmological concepts.

R.P.B. Singh 'Shiva's universe and pilgrimage journeys', *The Ley Hunter* No.125 (1996) p24-29. [RT]

## No mystery about Orion

Robert Bauval and Adrian Gilbert's well-publicised book, *The Orion Mystery* (Heinemann 1994) is given close examination by Middle East archaeologist and archaeoastronomy expert Dr Robert Chadwick. He finds a whole string of errors and plenty of selective use of evidence. He concludes that 'Matching ten percent of pyramids in that area to thousands of visible stars in the firmament does not constitute any viable pyramid-star correlation. Knowing the practical nature of the ancient Egyptians, if they had really

wanted to create a pyramid-star matching scheme, it is certain they would have done a much better job.'

R. Chadwick 'The so-called "Orion Mystery"' *KMT* Vol.7 No.3 Fall 1996 p74-83 [Copy kindly submitted by Billie Walker-John.] [RT]

## No mystery about Sphinx

While we are debunking modern myth making about the ancient Egyptians, the suggestion that 'geological evidence' makes the Sphinx ridiculously old has also been fully refuted.

K.L. Gauri, J.J. Sinai and J.K. Bandyopadhyay 'Geologic weathering and its implications on the age of the Sphinx' *Geoarchaeology* Vol.10, No.2, p119-133. [RT]

## Folklore of holy wells

A sampling of the beliefs associated with British holy wells - both traditional and modern-day paganism.

Rowan, 'Buttons, bras and pins' *White Dragon* No.12 Lughnasa 1996 p4-8. [RT]

## Folklore of crossroads

An overview of the folklore associated with crossroads, with special emphasis on 'corpse ways'.

Liam Rogers 'The enchanted crossroads' *White Dragon* No.12 Lughnasa 1996 p9-11. [RT]

## Lady Godda

Wild Edric and Lady Godda are figures well-known in Shropshire folklore. Lady Godda seems to be another form of 'Lady Godiva' (now associated with Coventry but there is no historical link) and may have been a local goddess in Anglo-Saxon times.

'Lady Godda - Goddess of Mercia' *White Dragon* No.12 Lughnasa 1996 p17-18.

[As these three Abstracts suggest, *White Dragon* has begun

to fulfill the editor's aims of taking over from where *Mercian Mysteries* left off (see *At the Edge* No.1) - indeed is well on course to provide first-rate coverage of 'Earth mysteries' in the Midlands.] [RT]

## Toot hills and watch hills

An article dealing with the toot hill at Westminster confirms that these were Anglo-Saxon 'civil defence' look-out places. The author suggests they are most commonly placed on boundaries of 'regions' (rather than near their centres where other defences could be expected). The latest edition of Kenneth Cameron's *English Place Names* also notes that toot hills might also be called 'watch hills' and lead to such toponyms as Wardle and Warthill.

Gabriel Pepper, 'Tothill Street Westminster, and Anglo-Saxon civil defence', *London Archaeologist*, Spring 1966, p432-3 [my thanks to Stephen Pollington for providing a copy]; K. Cameron, *English place names*, Batsford (rev. edn. 1996) p181. [RT]

## Sing us a light

A group of visitors to Fourknocks passage tomb in Ireland noticed the rock art which forms an 'undulating line' running around the interior. They decided to chant, using the line as musical notation. One of the group reports: 'A bright light appeared from the stones, ran around the top of them, and then rose upwards and disappeared.' Was this an earth light or entoptic phenomena?

*Touchstone* No.45 p11 July 1996. [RT]

## Comic dragons

Dragon legends have been interpreted as symbols of

untamed energies in the earth, subdued by heroes: but they have their comic side. D.Hey in 'The Dragon of Wantley: Rural Popular Culture And Local Legend' looks at a jocular tale which is nevertheless rooted in the Yorkshire landscape. *Rural History* 4 (1993). [JH]

## Moot sites

Research into the choice of site for Anglo-Saxon moots, and their significance in terms of wilderness and government, depends on a corpus of material which will identify these ancient places. 'Bolesford, North Riding: a Lost Wapentake Centre and its Landscape', in *Landscape History* 15 (1993), puts one such centre in context. [JH]

## Drama of ritual

We see ancient sites as static monuments, but in their working lives they were intended to form part of a drama of ritual movements. S.Coleman and J.Elsner have interpreted St.Catherine's monastery on Mount Sinai as a backdrop for sacred acts: 'The Pilgrim's Progress: Art, Architecture and Ritual Movement at Sinai', *World Archaeology* 26 (1994) pp73-89. [JH]

## Lightning and shamanism

The woman buried face downward in an Anglo-Saxon cemetery at Sewerby (Yorkshire) has often been interpreted as a live sacrifice. Forensic pathologists, studying the contorted body, suggest she may instead have been a fire victim, perhaps struck by lightning: special rituals for victims, or survivors, of lightning are attested in a shamanic context. Christopher J. Knusel et al, 'Death Decay and Ritual Reconstruction', *Oxford Journal of Archaeology* 15 (1996) pp121-128. [JH]



## Secret shoes

Boundaries between houses and the outside world were traditionally protected by magical charms or guardians, the most durable of these being old shoes. They are found in rafters, walls, doors and chimneys: no-one knows quite why, the custom existing up to the present without articulate reasons. Long-term readers of *Mercian Mysteries* may remember the haunted shoes of Papillon Hall, now in Leicester Museum. June Swann writes from the viewpoint of a costume specialist: 'Shoes Concealed in Buildings', *Costume* 30 (1996) pp56-69. [JH]

## Stone circles studied

John Barnatt's work on Derbyshire stone circles led him from Thom-style interpretations to a more agnostic archaeological viewpoint. Still active in the field, he has monitored restoration work which provides fresh dates and environmental records for the sites: they appear to have been set up in a period of early heathland clearance. 'Recent Research at Peak District Stone Circles', *Derbyshire Archaeological Journal* 116 (1996) pp27-48. [JH]

## Was he? Wasn't he?

The last days of classical paganism are a touchy subject. The Emperor Constantine has been seen by some as the heroic suppressor of the old religion, and by others as its secret adherent. John Curran argues that he was a Christian, but one who had to condone paganism while promoting the new faith piecemeal. Pagan cult sites continued in use because they had become part of civic ritual rather than belief. 'Constantine and the Ancient Cults of Rome: The Legal Evidence', *Greece & Rome* 43 (1996) pp68-80. [JH]

## Not everywhere is like Wessex

Despite the success of pagan Vikings throughout the Danelaw, Christian sites continued in use because there was a pagan acceptance of Christian holiness as well as a shared body of ritual practice. Dawn M. Hadley in 'Conquest, Colonisation and the Church: Ecclesiastical Organisation in the Danelaw' also argues that the model of minster churches serving large territories, derived from Wessex evidence, may not be appropriate to this area. *Historical Research* 69 (1996) pp109-128. [JH]

## 'Savages only build mud huts'

Alternative visions of archaeology can seldom have been as dramatic as those promoted when Great Zimbabwe was discovered in 1871. Anxious to avoid giving it status as an African work, the first excavators attributed it to the Arabians who also built Stonehenge and Carnac, oriented their sites to the summer solstice, and conducted fertility rites in the moonlight. Does that sound a little near the knuckle? Martin Hall's voyage through racist fantasy opens with a re-reading of *King Solomon's Mines*, inspired and inspiring the Zimbabwe fantasies, which he decodes as a white occupation of a black female body. I missed all that as a lad. 'Heads and Tales', *Representations* 54 (1996) pp104-123. [JH]

## New fangled ancestor cults

We think of the cult of the dead as a universal practice determining the geomancy of tombs and barrows. But is it a cultural invention? Conventional readings of Biblical stories like that of Saul and the Witch of Endor have implied that

reverence of the dead existed in Israel from the earliest times, but new work suggests that it was an idea imported from Assyria c.700 BC. See review in *Journal of Theological Studies* 47 (1996) ppl69-172 [JH]

## Tibetans treated like nasty Popists

Modern pagan and spiritual writers like to represent Tibetan Buddhism as a reworking of the shamanic practices of Bön-po. This approach tends to dismiss the complex religion as a version of the archaic one, and is derived unconsciously from a tradition in European Protestantism which denigrated Catholicism by deriving it from pre-Christian practices. Donald Lopez in 'Lamaism' and the Disappearance of Tibet' outlines how Vajrayana practice was assimilated by indignant Protestant travellers to their idea of Catholicism as a degraded and paganised religion. *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 28 (1996) pp3-25 [JH]

## The cult of the name

The circumstances which give places the reputation of being holy can be quite accidental. A well in Syria began to receive a cult after it was identified as having the same name as a holy site (the Well of the Leaf) in Jerusalem; first stories were told about it, now there is a cult building. A. Shalem, 'Bi'r al-Waraqqa: Legend and Truth - A Note on Mediaeval Sacred Geography', *Palestine Exploration Quarterly* 127 (1995) pp50-61. [JH]

## The cult of the place

The Muslim shrine or magam forms part of intensive veneration by the co-existing faiths of the Holy Land. Shrines enhance or replace a sacred landscape of springs, caves and stones to which a story of a holy man has become attached. Andrew Petersen in

'A Preliminary Report On Three Muslim Shrines in Palestine' draws the parallel with landscape cult places in the Celtic West; except that in Palestine there is no likelihood of continuity from ancient paganism. *Levant* 28 (1996) pp97-113. [JH]

The Abstracts of *At the Edge* have previously concentrated on articles in recent periodicals. By way of an 'experiment', this collection of Abstracts concludes with a selection from more-or-less recent books. All the following summaries have been prepared by Jeremy Harte.

**Irada Malkin, *Myth and Territory in the Spartan Mediterranean* (Cambridge UP, 1994)**

The Spartans prided themselves on being a closed society, but their geomythical vision extended throughout the Greek world making connections between gods, ancestors and territory.

**S.C. Rowell, *Lithuania Ascending: A Pagan Empire in East-Central Europe, 1295-1345* (Cambridge UP, 1994)**

Lithuanian paganism is as near as we will ever come to studying a pagan tradition of old Europe through contemporary documents. Rowell finds it to be heterogeneous, decentralised and although non-doctrinal was steadily defended against Christians.

**Kenneth Painter (ed.), *'Churches Built in Ancient Times': Recent Studies in Early Christian Archaeology* (Society of Antiquaries of London, 1994)**

Martin Biddle presents his report on the most central of pilgrimage sites, the Tomb of Christ. There is also a paper by Warwick Rodwell on early Channel Island churches, which incorporate Christianised menhirs in the Breton manner.

**Martin Locock (ed.), *Meaningful Architecture: Social Interpretation of Buildings* (Avebury Press, Aldershot, 1994)**

With a paper on Augustinian houses in Scotland, which have repetitive geometric patterns in their layout, a geomantic feature probably reflecting royal patronage.

**Charles R. Bawden, *Confronting the Supernatural: Mongolian Traditional Ways and Means* (Wiesbaden, 1994)**

Mongolian shamanism, after co-existing at first with Buddhism and then Communism, is making something of a comeback. This work includes an essay on the veneration of the sacred cairn or *obo*. Stand back for a wave of interest in Mongolian astrology and divination once the New Age crowd get bored with *feng-shui* and medicine wheels.

**M.R. Wright, *Cosmology in Antiquity* (Routledge, 1995)**

Cosmology is not exactly a science, since the totality of things cannot be experimented on or compared with. In the Greek world it was the province of philosophers and their theories about the form of the universe directly reflected social order and the nature of the gods. Geomantic schemes such as macrocosm/microcosm, opposed elements and astral eschatology evolved in this context.

**David Bourdon, *Designing the Earth* (Harry N. Abrams, 1995)**

A beautiful geomantic gazetteer of almost all the planet, covering mounds, terraces, canals, carved hills, petroglyphs and megaliths. The final stage on landscape art suggest that this continues the earlier tradition. Noguchi's 'Scheme For A Face To Be Seen From Mars' (1945) is the dead spit of the Cydonia face, which suggests that imitation is the sincerest form of flattery on other planets, too.

**John Marsden, *Sea Road of the Saints: Celtic Holy Men in the Hebrides* (Floris Books, 1995)**

The offshore islands of Scotland were consecrated by the presence of Irish saints, establishing isolated communities as part of a life of pilgrimage. At the same time their presence on maritime through-routes was a kind of cultural colonisation.

**Jill Dubisch, *In a Different Place: Pilgrimage, Gender and Politics at a Greek Island Shrine* (Princeton UP, 1995)**

The church of the Virgin of the Assumption on Tinos is a centre of pilgrimage valued by women because it gets them away from the constriction of home and provides an environment where they can perform sacred ritual together. Doing things, rather than adhering to beliefs about them, is what matters.

**J.B. Rives, *Religion and Authority in Roman Carthage from Augustus to Constantine* (Oxford UP, 1995)**

We tend to play off our ideal of local paganism, responsive to the spirit of place, against the uniformity of Christian cult. This does not match up with the facts, at least in late antiquity: a regional study shows that local Punic cults were standardised to fit in with the creation of a unified imperial community, and that in the end Christianity was welcomed because it speeded up the process of standardisation.

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Thanks to all the readers who sent in cuttings - *please keep them coming in*. They are *all* most appreciated, although there is no way I can use every one in the Abstracts section (unless you want the whole of *At the Edge* to become one big Abstracts section!!!!).



# REVIEWS R

Rodney Castleden

## THE CERNE GIANT

Dorset Publishing Company  
1996

A5, 256 pages, 49 b&w photos,  
66 line drawings, paperback  
£12.95

They are rejoicing in the tea-shops of Cerne. This full length study rehabilitates the Giant, not as a modern folly, but as the central feature of an Iron Age shrine. Castleden opens with a level-headed account of the figure's range of meanings in recent times, showing how his association with sexuality is a product of modern preoccupations rather than an ancient tradition.

True, the earliest reference to the Giant dates from 1694, so everything from before then has to be supplied by speculation, and speculation runs wild in some of his readings of mediaeval texts. A local saint's life, for instance, which says *et Heliae typo* ('after the example of Elijah') is translated 'to the figure on a wall of the god Helia', offering a pretext for the eighteenth century identification of the Giant as Helis, which is or might be Brythonic for 'the hunter'. As this suggests, the real heroes of the book are the Celts, and the central chapters offer a plausible analysis of territory in Iron Age Dorset. Cerne was perhaps a central shrine. The proposed cult complex there includes a hilltop earthwork and a holy well, though to be fair there is no evidence that either feature is

pre-mediaeval. And some errors have crept in - Durotriges does not mean 'water people', the Union of Ptolemy was Hod Hill not Maiden Castle, and the Iron Age origin of the Bettiscombe skull is only an antiquarian fancy.

But against such slips can be set extensive iconographic research which (if the Giant should turn out to be ancient) would offer Celtic parallels to his nudity, club and erection. Castleden's meticulous resistivity surveys have found lines under the Giant's left arm which can be interpreted as a cloak, and contour survey of a mound under the left hand has suggested, at high magnification, a severed head; sceptical readers may also find it reminiscent of the Cydonia face. By the last chapter the Giant is being favourably set alongside his supposed contemporary, Christ. Perhaps optical survey techniques will confirm the date, if not the comparison.

Jeremy Harte

Andrew Collins

## FROM THE ASHES OF ANGELS

### The Forbidden Legacy of a Fallen Race

Michael Joseph 1996

140 x 223 mm, 448 pages, 24  
photos, line drawings, hardback  
£16.99

It is clearly the belief of the author that in reading the Book of Enoch, a Judaic pseudepigrapha, he has stumbled across something which reveals a totally new dimension in human history, namely the identity of an 'advanced' race, he believes, following other recent writers, to have existed in Egypt (and as a remnant in Turkey) thousands of years before orthodox historians and archaeologists believe civilised society developed in that country.

Although known about for centuries, the Book of Enoch only became available in complete form to scholars in 1821, when an English translation by the Oxford Hebraist, William Laurence, was published. Mr Collins is of the opinion that behind its anonymous author, or authors, story of the 'sons of God' marrying the 'daughters of men', who then bore them children who were giants, and of the 'sons', or 'Watchers', revealing forbidden knowledge to humanity, hence the 'advanced' tag is a grain of historical fact. This belief indicates an unfamiliarity on his part with the reasons for the compilation of works such as the Book of Enoch and results in him confusing an apocalyptic vision with an historical drama.

The Book of Enoch was originally compiled some time between about 175-64 BC, its content and style being indicative of its author, or authors, having been members of the Hasidaean sect or group, which was one of several such groups characterised by their fanatical opposition to any liberal trends within Judaism and their rigid adherence to the letter of the Law, as they interpreted it. They upheld their belief with a fundamentalist ferocity that allowed them to rationalise assassination of opponents among their co-religionists who differed with them.

The Book of Enoch was compiled at a time of intense political stress and intellectual and religious ferment and this religio-political character is clear, even in the quotations from it used by Collins. What is surprising is his failure to recognise the fact and to appreciate its significance. The book opens with the announcement of a judgement by god on the Jews as being imminent, then follows the story of the fallen angels, or Watchers, on which Collins bases his theory. This is symbolic of what the author or authors identify as a rebellion

against the Law. Enoch, in common with similar works, paints an ecstatic word-picture of the last days when god would establish his kingdom on earth and share his power with his followers having executed a terrible punishment on those who transgressed the Law and also those who had put the 'chosen people' into servitude.

Collins, then, is seen to have fallen into the trap so many of those inexperienced in theological debate do when creating a literalistic scenario out of what is a work in which the key to understanding is a knowledge of Judaic eschatology.

Little point is served in following the rest of the author's book, which due to his failure to understand his basic source material constitutes an argument, albeit rather lengthy, for his chimera-like ancient society in Egypt. His evidence for this is largely a reiteration of speculations concerning the date of certain structures on the Giza plateau advanced by Anthony West, who holds von Däniken type notions, and some other writers, coupled with a theory proposed by the geologist, Professor Robert Schoch, who, on geological grounds, postulates a date for the Sphinx at Giza of c.8,000 BC. His case has been seriously challenged by another geologist, Professor James Harrell, though the challenge and the still continuing debate it has generated is ignored by Collins, who appears to suffer from the misguided impression that Schoch's 'tentative assumption', as the geologist himself has described his theory, has not be subjected to any substantive criticism from geologists or Egyptologists. [See also Abstracts section elsewhere in this issue. - R.N.T.]

The author has written an interesting book which could have been important had he sought to expand upon a theme which hovers ghost-like around its pages, namely the now-discarded diffusionist theory. Perhaps in another book, and

one is promised, he will come down to earth and pursue this subject in more detail without having hung a theological millstone around his neck.

R.W. Morrell

**L. M. Wright**

## **JESUS THE PAGAN SUN GOD**

Fairview Books 1996

A5, 170 pages, illustrated, card covers, stapled £7.50 incl. p&p from

Fairview Books, 12 Kent Road, Old Town, Swindon, SN1 3NJ

The myth theory of christian origins has its origin among Jewish and pagan critics of the christian cult sometime in the second century. When eventually the Roman authorities adopted, for political reasons, the cult as the official superstition of their empire it enabled the christian leadership to institute a systematic policy designed to eradicate or suppress not only its pagan rivals but also those considered unorthodox within its own ranks.

In the process critical literature, including works advocating the myth theory, went up in flames, the only trace of them to survive being extracts incorporated in the works of christian apologists who had sought to answer them. Criticism of christianity was to become and remain a capital offence in most European countries well into the eighteenth century; only then did the right of free expression start to rear its healthy head, though even now blasphemy laws remain on the statute book in Britain.

This work presents only one aspect of the myth theory, by no means the most convincing, for according to Dr Wright, his primary thesis is that solar mythology and astrology constitute the core of the christian legend. To illustrate this he draws upon a wide

spectrum of information, though he should have exercised more care in his selection of solar deities, for some mentioned cannot by any stretch of the imagination be so categorised. Although offering a bibliography this is more significant for what it excludes than what it includes - some important recent studies, notably those by Professor G.A. Wells, being among those not listed.

An interesting book, then, particularly to those who know nothing of the myth theory, but not one which can be said to constitute a comprehensive introduction to the subject. Nor does the poor design and patchy printing help. Nevertheless, if you want an interesting insight into a theory you might not have encountered before then this book will be found to be of considerable value.

R.W. Morrell

**Stephen Pollington**

## **THE ENGLISH WARRIOR**

**from earliest times to  
1066**

Anglo-Saxon Books 1996

175 x 250 mm, 267 pages, illustrated, perfect bound £14.95

The core subject of this book is somewhat outside the scope of *At the Edge* but the viewpoint of *The English Warrior* is wider than the title implies, putting the Anglo-Saxon warriors into a more comprehensive social context. It is particularly commendable because of the way the author rejects two biases which currently predominate among early medieval scholars. The first is to praise early English Christianity and learning, but to neglect the political and military acumen which made possible the performance and preservation of these other accomplishments. The second is the way every aspect of Old English literature has been analysed in such a way



## English Warrior

from earliest times to 1066



Stephen Pollington

as to suggest that the sources must be biblical - despite the overall descriptions of the poems being entirely consistent with Germanic culture (albeit sometimes idealized).

*The English Warrior* summarises a substantial specialist literature, providing an easily-digested yet detailed overview. Much needs to be left unsaid in a book of this length but, nevertheless, Pollington draws in such landscape-related topics as the linear defensive ditches characteristic of the Anglo-Saxon era. He also briefly discusses why nearly all named and identifiable battle sites are either at ancient monuments (such as hill forts or deserted Roman cities) or at river crossings - even though there is little tactical advantage in these sites. Perhaps the very act of occupation of a symbolic place - such as a barrow, with all its totemic overtones - would have provoked a challenge to the honour of the local defenders?

The excellent illustrations and attractive layout of this book are entirely in keeping with the quality of the author's research and ideas, making *The English Warrior* an important aid to enhancing popular awareness of the neglected splendour of Anglo-Saxon culture.

Bob Trubshaw

John Michell

## THE TRAVELLER'S GUIDE TO SACRED ENGLAND

Gothic Image 1996

215 x 112 mm, 340 pages, illustrated, paperback £12.95

This is the first UK edition of a book originally published in the USA in 1988. It is a comprehensive guide to the more tourist-inviting cathedrals, abbeys and the like in England. The occasional hermitage and holy well creeps in from time to time, along with Stonehenge and Avebury. The text is far more informative than might be expected for a tourist guide clearly aimed at the transatlantic 'pilgrim' and is accompanied by numerous nineteenth century engravings (although at least some of these are less than accurate - such as a very bowdlerised version of the sheela-na-gig at Kilpeck). Overall, this book will probably appeal most to people who might not be drawn to Michell's more overtly earth mysteries works.

Bob Trubshaw

Laurence Main

## IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF KING ARTHUR

Western Mail and Echo 1995

130 x 208 mm, 181 pages, full colour illustrations throughout, perfect bound. £7.95

The title is out-and-out marketing hype and the author struggles to provide some substance to support it. But, despite such an inauspicious opening, I must admit I rather like this book. Main has written so many walking guides (this, he claims, is his 39th) that the descriptions of the routes, guidance on access via public transport, and notes about what is to be seen are concise but convincing.

The 20 walks are all in Wales, mostly quite short (around 3 or 4 miles) - with one of nearly 12 miles for the more ambitious and, predictably, all take in a number of ancient sites which myth links with Arthur. The book itself is a sturdy paperback with rounded corners and, by the standards of walking guides, rather wonderfully designed with colour on all pages - with subtle tints behind the line drawings and plenty of colour photographs used as double-page spreads. Unfortunately, the photography is standard 'blue skies and sunshine' tourism style, which does little to suggest a romantic 'Arthurian atmosphere'. Overall, a useful item to be obtained for a walking break taking in some dramatic Welsh scenery.

Bob Trubshaw

Kati-Ma Koppana

## OF TREE AND ROCK

### Short Glimpses of Finnish Deities

Mandragora Dimensions (Finland) 1996

A4, 24 pages, illustrated, card covers £3.95

Available in UK only from Heart of Albion Press, 2 Cross Hill Close, Wymeswold, Loughborough, LE12 6UJ (Please add 40p p&p).

Christianity came late to Finland and, compared to the complex Christian 'overlays' inherent in the north European mythology, the myths of the Finnish pagan deities provide a clearly-focused idea of earlier beliefs. However, apart from perhaps the *Kalevala*, most people have never read anything about Finnish traditional beliefs. Even entries in reputable encyclopedias may contain inadvertent errors.

This booklet is a revised version of *Finnish Gods* which

appeared in 1990. Like its predecessor, it provides a concise but informative introduction to this otherwise little-known but fascinating subject and is a useful companion to Kati-Ma Koppana's other studies of Finnish traditional customs (also available from Heart of Albion Press).

Bob Trubshaw

**Danny Sullivan and  
Jo-Anne Wilder**

## ANCIENT AND SACRED SITES OF THE COTSWOLDS

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Bob Trubshaw

# One candle to blow out

## An editorial afterword

**Bob Trubshaw**

So, *At the Edge* is now nearly a year old. General feedback suggests that 'So far, so good', although much remains to be done to build up subscriptions to a level which will ensure long-term viability. Furthermore, the balance of articles is yet to match what I'm really striving for - for instance, all issues so far have been rather short on archaeology.

Thanks to all the contributors for making the magazine what it is, and thanks to all subscribers for providing the essential financial 'lubrication' for the magazine to exist at all.

This issue, as you will have gathered by now, is somewhat 'thematic' in that the majority of articles deal with tree veneration and Green Men (which, depending on your point of view, may - or may

not - be related topics!). The next issue will be a 'general' issue, but issues 6 and 8 are planned to be 'themed'.

In some ways, this issue of *At the Edge* is slightly anomalous in that several articles have less to do with new expositions and much more to do with regional surveys of little-known sites and lore. While this will appeal to a number of former *Mercian Mysteries* subscribers, I see little need to make such material a major part of *At the Edge* as several other magazines can and do publish equally good local material. Rest assured, the emphasis of *At the Edge* will continue to concentrate on bringing to the readers' attentions the latest ideas and interpretations pertaining to archaeology, folklore and mythology.



### Heart of Albion Press

Both books are paperbacks of about 240 pages and cost £9.95 each. Until the end of

February 1997 they are available **post free** (in the UK only) to *At the Edge* readers. Cheques to:

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### TO BE PUBLISHED IN DECEMBER:

*Ymir's Flesh - north European creation mythologies*  
by Alby Stone

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## Aspects of Anglo-Saxon Magic

Bill Griffiths

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It seems that there was a convergence of the two cultures, native and Christian, and this may affect the tendency to view pagan 'gods' as near omnipotent beings. Here it is argued that their origin was usually ancestral, their status rising to match the organisational needs of the Germanic migrants or to parallel the growing authority of the Church and its god. At a popular level did the familiar dead continue to be regarded as a source of benevolent power?

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Stephen Pollington

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